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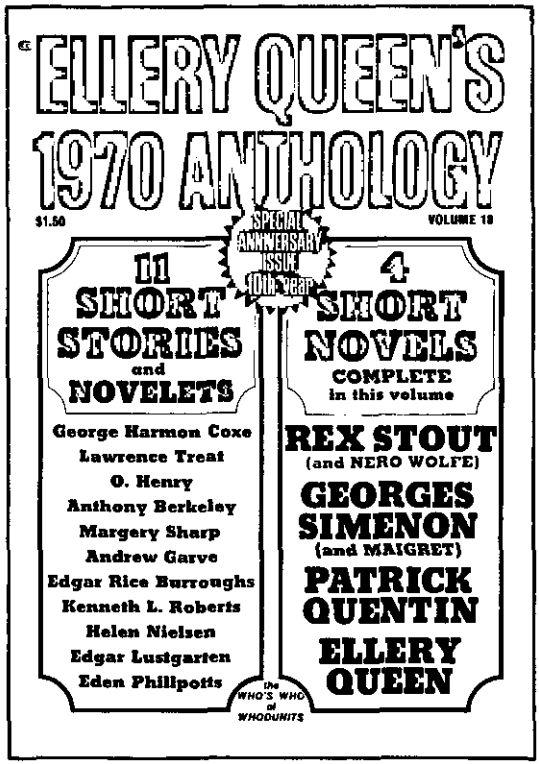

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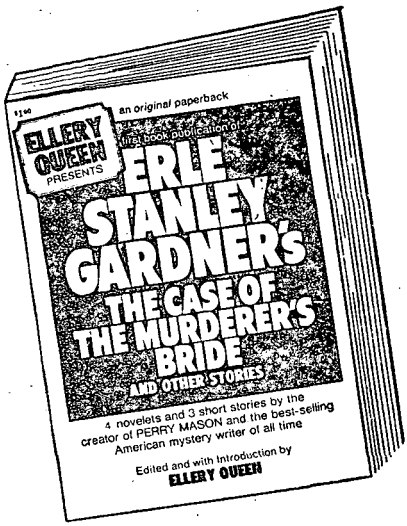
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a NEW Pierre Chambrun story by

HUGH PENTECOST

Dr. Conrad Walbruck, another Dr. Schweitzer, was one of the world's great humanitarians. He could not bear to stand by silently and watch the ravages of starvation and pestilence in such places as Biafra. So he finally decided, despite his advanced age, to journey from Africa to the United Nations and make a personal plea for help to the General Assembly—for Peace at long last in the War against famine and disease.

Dr. Walbruck and his wife stayed, of course, at the Beaumont, New York City's top luxury hotel—and that is how Pierre Chambrun, resident manager of the Beaumont, became involved in the strange events that happen so often in the "city within a city"...

PIERRE CHAMBRUN AND THE WAR FOR PEACE

by HUGH PENTECOST

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER DR. Conrad Walbruck consciously modeled himself after the great Dr. Albert Schweitzer or not. Certainly their careers ran a curiously parallel course. They were both great physicians, great philosophers. They both shunned the opportunities for glory and wealth in the great sophisticated centers of the world. They both toiled twenty-hours a day in jungle hospitals, struggling to save lives, fighting to get the funds for medical supplies and equipment. They both shone like bright stars in a desert sky. They were both the focal points for pilgrimages by the famous, the rich, and the humble.

These two great healers actually worked near each other in terms of today's world, the jet world, yet, so far as I know, they never

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actually met. Dr. Walbruck had not left his jungle hospital for more than thirty years until the occasion that brought him to the Beaumont, the world's top luxury hotel, in New York City. He came to address the United Nations. In Biafra, not far from his hospital, 16,000 children were dying each day—a child every five and one-half seconds, day and night, from the ravages of starvation and disease.

Dr. Walbruck, we knew from his wife, had decided he could no longer stand by, helpless, and watch this happen. He would make his appeal in person to the highest tribunal in the world, the U.N. If they could not stop the war in Biafra they could at least put an end to the hunger and sickness. As a result of this public appeal, spotlighted around the globe, Dr. Walbruck also hoped to raise several million dollars from private sources to restock and re-equip his own hospital for his war against the Horsemen of Famine and Pestilence.

The Walbrucks—Dr. Conrad and his wife Gretchen—arrived at the Beaumont at 2:00 A.M. on a Wednesday morning. Their journey had been carried out in relative secrecy, so there were no reporters. They were taken, without fanfare, to their suite on the 10th floor, and, I assume, they slept the sleep of the just. It must have been an exhausting journey for the great man because he was approaching his 80th birthday.

At 9:22 the following morning I was where I always was at precisely 9:22—standing beside Pierre Chambrun's flat-topped Florentine carved desk in his luxurious office on the second floor of the Beaumont. Chambrun is a dark stocky man with black eyes which, hidden in deep pouches, can twinkle with humor or turn as cold as newly minted dimes. The Beaumont, under the managing directorship of Chambrun, is a world in itself, a way of life. I am one of the cogs in a machine that operates with Swiss-watch efficiency under Chambrun's watchful eye. I have a nice brass plate on the door of my fourth-floor office which says that I am MARK HASKELL, PUBLIC RELATIONS.

Chambrun eats only two meals a day: a hearty breakfast consisting of steak or chops or brook trout or perhaps a Dover sole, and quantities of gluten toast with sweet butter and English marmalade, and coffee—three cups of American coffee followed throughout the rest of the day by Turkish coffee, prepared on a sideboard by his remarkable secretary, Miss Ruysdale; and a gourmet dinner at 7:00 P.M., also served in the office, for which Chambrun dresses whether he has a guest or not.

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Chambrun, born in France, came to this country as a boy and has been in the hotel business all his life, starting as a shoeshine boy in an East Side hotel operated by an uncle. He has reached the top of the heap at the Beaumont, having made an art of the business of hotel management. He speaks seven languages fluently, can assume a Continental manner that would please a Duchess or a Queen, and can be frighteningly tough with anyone, employee or guest, who upsets the routines of the hotel.

It is a world of exact routines—which is why it works so well. At 9:00 in the morning a waiter brings the breakfast to the office, accompanied by Monsieur Fresney, the hotel's head chef, who waits for a nod of approval. At 9:10 Miss Ruysdale comes in with the registration cards of guests who have arrived since the night before. At 9:22 I enter Chambrun's office. Chambrun is then on his second cup of coffee and his first Egyptian cigarette of the day. He instructs me about the new arrivals—whether they are news, whether they need special attention or special watching.

On this particular morning he passed me a card and I saw that Dr. and Mrs. Conrad Walbruck had arrived. I had known they were coming and that Chambrun had considered the famous doctor sufficiently important for the manager himself to be on hand to act as official greeter.

"The old man made the trip in satisfactory shape?" I asked.

"Amazing person," Chambrun said. "He looks like an Old Testament prophet. Long white beard, eyes almost hidden by bushy white eyebrows. Somehow like one's childhood concept of Moses on the Mountain."

"I don't think I've ever seen a photograph of him."

"One of his foibles," Chambrun said. "No cameras. This, by the way, becomes part of your job, Mark. The good doctor is to be protected from any and every kind of intrusion. No cameramen, no interviewers, no autograph hunters. No one is to be permitted to go to his suite without prearrangement, and only then accompanied by Jerry Dodd or one of his boys to make sure no one else gets in."

Jerry Dodd is our house officer, the Beaumont's security chief.

"He's afraid of something?" I asked.

Chambrun's smile was thin. "He's afraid of wasted time," he said. "He's got so little left at eighty that he insists on being protected from anything trivial, anything purely social. He will make his speech before the U.N. General Assembly this afternoon, and he will fly back to his hospital tonight. He will have taken thirty-six hours out of his life to help

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fight the war for peace and to raise some much-needed money. It took considerable persuading to get him to come here at all, according to his wife. Someone else should have been able to do the sales job. But he was finally convinced there would be a special magic to his being here in person. The U.N. is to be his only public exposure. When the time comes for him to leave for the U.N., we take him down on a service elevator to the kitchens. There will be a limousine waiting for him at the rear door. He'll come back the same way, and take off for the airport later the same way. No chance of any approach from anyone anywhere. You are not to give out the word that he is here to anyone until after he is gone. Understood?"

"Understood."

The office door opened and Jerry Dodd, the house officer, came in. Jerry, a dark wiry man with the sharpest eyes you've ever seen, is one of Chambrun's most trusted people. A pleasant professional smile doesn't hide the fact that Jerry is reading the maker's label on the inside of your shirt collar. He is tough and efficient, created in Chambrun's mold. He is one of three employees who would dare walk into Chambrun's private office unannounced; Miss Ruysdale and I are the only others granted that privilege.

"Sorry to interrupt," Jerry said. "We've had a high dive. From somewhere well up on the Fifth Avenue side."

Jerry was reporting a suicide.

"Bounced off the steel awning at the front door and onto the sidewalk," Jerry said. "Young girl, so far unidentified. No handbag."

Sudden, even violent death is not rare at the Beaumont. The hotel is like a small city, with its own shops and restaurants, its own small hospital and medical staff, its own police force, its city manager in the person of Chambrun, its own night clubs and bars, its own brokerage office with ticker tapes and a miniature Big Board. Whatever can happen in a small city can happen at the Beaumont. People die of heart attacks; people fall and injure themselves critically; people take overdoses of sleeping pills or hang themselves from a coat hook in a closet or jump from a high floor. What is part of life in any community is part of life at the Beaumont.

Suicides outrage Chambrun but not for any moral or philosophical reason. They turn the unpleasant spotlight of publicity on the hotel, and what damages the hotel damages Chambrun.

"Why here?" he said that morning, his eyes bright with anger. "Why do it on *my* rug?"

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Mystery is bad for the hotel. *Unknown Girl Leaps to Death* is designed to keep people focusing on the story, wondering who and especially why. Quick identification and burial of the story at Chambrun would hope for.

I didn't have to look at the remains of the girl, thank God. However, we turned out to be lucky. When they undressed the body at the morgue they found a little gold locket on a fine gold chain around the girl's neck. It gave her name—Karen Mosely. She was in the phone book. A horrified roommate told the police that she was a translator for one of the African delegations at the U.N. She had spent two years in the Peace Corps—in, of all places, Biafra. That was coincidence Number One.

Coincidence Number Two was that Miss Mosely had told her roommate after breakfast that morning that she was headed for the Beaumont in the hope of seeing Dr. and Mrs. Walbruck whom she had known—and loved—in Biafra.

A myth circulates among the employees of the Beaumont that Chambrun has a personal, built-in radar mechanism, or eyes in the back of his head, or secret peepholes into every room. The truth is that he knows the details of everyone's job down to the most inconsequential minutiae, so he knows who should be where and when and why. When he has a question he knows whom to ask and why they should have an answer.

When the information came in on Miss Karen Mosely, I was with Chambrun in his office. We were about an hour away from the time when Dr. Conrad Walbruck would be whisked down a service elevator and taken to a waiting limousine for his trip to the U.N.

Security had been set up around the Walbrucks, and Chambrun now checked it out. First there was Mrs. Veach, the chief operator on the hotel switchboard. There had been special orders about the Walbrucks. No incoming calls, house or outside. If anyone phoned, the caller would be asked his or her name and for a return number. Mrs. Veach would then relay the name and number to Mrs. Walbruck and she could call back or not as she chose.

"Was there a call this morning for the Walbrucks from a Karen Mosely?" Chambrun asked.

Mrs. Veach checked her lists. There had not been such a call. There had been only three: one from the office of the Secretary-General of the U.N., one from the managing editor of *The Times,* and one from an airline official simply to report that the return journey was all arranged. Mrs. Walbruck had called back the Sec-

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retary-General; she had ignored the other two calls.

Karen Mosely, whatever her intentions, had not announced herself to the Walbrucks.

"How would she know they were staying here?" I asked.

Chambrun shrugged. "United Nations," he said. "The girl is a linguist, a translator. She could have heard someone talking."

"But she didn't come after all."

"But she did," Chambrun said, "and jumped—or was pushed—from high up."

There is the right place to ask the right question. Chambrun found it on the tenth floor in the person of Mrs. Kniffin, the housekeeper. Mrs. Kniffin had had a special assignment that morning—to watch the door of 10G, the Walbrucks' suite. If anyone seemed to be loitering around who had no business there, Jerry Dodd was to be notified at once.

"Did a young girl—mid-twenties—try to gain admittance to the suite, Mrs. Kniffin?" Chambrun asked.

"No, sir," Mrs. Kniffin said. "That is, not exactly."

"So what did happen, exactly, Mrs. Kniffin?" Chambrun asked quietly.

"A young girl went in with Mrs. Walbruck."

"Went in with Mrs. Walbruck? Mrs. Walbruck had gone out somewhere?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Shortly after room service had brought them breakfast. She came out, looking a little vague, I thought. I—I asked her if I could help. I—I thought that was the right thing to do, Mr. Chambrun."

"Of course, Mrs. Kniffin. And were you able to help her?"

"She wanted some things from the drug store. I directed her to the one in the lobby, sir. I asked her if someone could do her errand for her. She said no, she'd rather enjoy going out. 'No one will bother me,' she said. So she went down in the elevator and came back maybe twenty minutes or so later. There was this young girl with her. She seemed excited like—laughing and gay. I heard her say she couldn't wait to see Dr. Walbruck. I took it they'd met in the drug store or the lobby."

"Quite probable," Chambrun said. "And did you see the young girl leave 10G?"

"Well, not exactly, Mr. Chambrun."

Chambrun's patience was monumental. "What exactly did you see, Mrs. Kniffin?"

"There was a phone call from the main office, sir. They'd sent me the wrong towels. I had the towels for 14, and 14 had the towels for 10. I talked for perhaps a minute or two. When I got back to the door of my cubbyhole here, the girl and this man were

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just passing my door."

"What man?"

"Just a—a man, sir. They were walking close together. I remember noticing that the girl wasn't laughing or happy any more. I thought she looked frightened, Mr. Chambrun."

"What did the man look like?"

"Nothing special, sir. Tall, grayish hair. I—I didn't notice too clearly."

"Clean shaven?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I mean, he might have had a little mustache. I didn't really notice. Clean-shaven, I'd say."

"You'd never seen him before?"

"No, sir."

"And they came out of 10G together?"

"I couldn't say that for sure, sir," Mrs. Kniffin said. "Of course the girl must have come out of 10G because I saw her go in. But I didn't see where the man came from. He could have come from 10G or he could have come from down the hall. You see, I was on the phone, sir."

"It would seem she didn't go out the window in 10G," I said.

Chambrun looked at me as if I were an idiot. "Of course she didn't!" he said. "The windows in 10G open on the side street, not on the Fifth Avenue front. I think we'd better talk to Mrs. Walbruck."

Gretchen Walbruck answered Chambrun's ring at the door of 10G. She was a surprise to me until I remembered that she was Dr. Walbruck's second wife, a nurse who had been working in his hospital at Biafra not long after he'd become a widower. She could not have been more than fifty, I thought, with a strong face, a tight grim mouth, and hostile gray eyes. She seemed to relax when she recognized Chambrun.

"You are early, Mr. Chambrun," she said. "We're not supposed to leave for another half hour. Conrad isn't ready yet."

"I'm afraid it's something else I've come about, Mrs. Walbruck," Chambrun said. "This is my associate, Mr. Haskell."

She looked at me without warmth. Then she stood aside and we went into the living room of the suite.

"You know a young girl named Karen Mosely?" Chambrun asked when we were inside.

"Of course," Mrs. Walbruck said. "Conrad and I knew her in Biafra. A charming girl. As a matter of fact, she's only just left here a little while ago."

"She came to call?"

"Yes and no," Mrs. Walbruck said. "She came to the hotel for that purpose, but before she could get in touch with us on the telephone I happened to run into her in the lobby. I'd been getting some things at the pharmacy. I brought Karen back up with me

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to see Conrad. They visited for a few minutes and then she left."

"Accompanied by—?"

"She left by herself."

"There was no one here except you and Dr. Walbruck?"

"Of course not. See here, Mr. Chambrun, what is this all about?"

"I'm afraid you must be prepared for a shock, Mrs. Walbruck. Karen Mosely jumped, or was thrown, from an upper-story window of the hotel very shortly after she left you. She is dead."

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Walbruck said.

"We identified her and traced her to you through her roommate. What was her state of mind when she was here?"

"Gay and laughing, as always," Mrs. Walbruck said, her voice low. "She was to have been the translator for one of the delegations when Conrad makes his speech at the United Nations. I didn't let her stay long. Conrad is very tired, and very much concentrated on what he's facing. He must sway the diplomats and the private philanthropists or we are lost, Mr. Chambrun."

There was the sound of a door opening and Mrs. Walbruck reached out and closed a strong hand on Chambrun's arm. "Please, do not tell Conrad what has happened—not till after he's made his speech. It will upset him dreadfully."

We all turned and watched Dr. Conrad Walbruck come, slowly into the room. He was truly an extraordinary figure, tall, rugged, slightly stooped, with a mass of thick white hair, bushy white eyebrows, and a white beard that rested on his chest as he came vaguely toward us, head lowered.

"Is it time to go, Gretchen?" he asked in a voice that had distant thunders in it.

"Soon, Conrad."

The doctor had met Chambrun the night before, but he looked at him as though he were a stranger. He didn't look at me at all. He walked toward the windows, a man with the whole world carried on his bent shoulders.

"Conrad was so fond of Karen," Mrs. Walbruck whispered.

It was then that Chambrun gave me an unexpected order. "You will drive to the United Nations with Dr. and Mrs. Walbruck, Mark," he said. "Stay for the speech and come back with them. I don't want them out of your sight."

"There is danger?" Mrs. Walbruck whispered, glancing fearfully at her husband.

Chambrun's eyes had a hard, opaque look. "The world is sick with fanaticism, Mrs. Walbruck," he said. "I will feel easier if Mark is with you."

Let me say I was puzzled. To be perfectly frank, I am not someone Chambrun would nor-

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mally pick for a bodyguard. I am a pleasant, not unattractive youngish man of 35. I have a seven handicap at golf, I am a better than average bridge player, I have good manners, and twice a year I determine to do something about physical fitness—a resolution I give up twice a year after very short periods of time. Jerry Dodd and his men were the bodyguard types. It was obvious I was simply to provide the customary Beaumont courtesy.

The trip to the U.N. was uneventful. The Walbrucks were taken downstairs in a service elevator to the kitchen and out a side door where a limousine was waiting. I rode in front with the chauffeur. At the U.N. Building we were greeted by a distinguished multi-nation committee which conducted the doctor to the great hall where the General Assembly meets. Dr. Walbruck was introduced to an attentive audience by the President of the Assembly and took his place at the speaker's rostrum. The delegates waited, many of them wearing earphones so that they could follow the translators' words.

Dr. Walbruck put a sheaf of papers on the rostrum. Before this august body one does not ordinarily speak extemporaneously. One's words are history. But I don't think Dr. Walbruck referred to his written speech more than twice in the next half hour. I won't attempt to quote from the speech—it is a matter of public record, if you are interested. I can only say that this tired old man had a magic with words that I've never heard matched—except by Winston Churchill in his prime. He made a stirring plea for human life, for Peace, for the great powers to direct their energies not against each other but against poverty, famine, and disease. He made an impassioned plea for help from governments and from private individuals. When he had finished he was given a long, enthusiastic standing ovation.

In the outer hallways people crowded around Walbruck to shake his hand, to touch his sleeve. I heard a distinguished gentleman I knew to be the head of one of the great foundations tell the doctor that one million dollars would be placed to his account in his personal bank the very next day.

At last we reached the waiting limousine and pulled away from the U.N. The old man sat with his head back against the rear seat, his eyes closed. He was exhausted.

"You were magnificent, sir," I said.

He didn't speak or move.

As we approached the side door to the Beaumont I saw that something was wrong. The

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sidewalk was crowded with press photographers and reporters, many of whom I knew. Somehow the word had got out.

"I cannot subject him to that!" Mrs. Walbruck said in a shrill voice.

I ordered the chauffeur to drive straight past and around to the front entrance on Fifth Avenue. Things seemed quiet there.

"Let me have a look in the lobby first," I said.

I went across the sidewalk to the revolving door and then into the lobby. I was surprised to find Chambrun standing just inside the entrance, and behind him another army of photographers and reporters, including a red-eyed television camera.

"Not interested in facing the cameras?" Chambrun asked, in a strange, hard voice.

"They were promised no cameras," I said. I didn't understand Chambrun's odd question.

"Perhaps I can persuade them," Chambrun said.

We went out and across the sidewalk to the limousine. Chambrun opened the door and got into the rear with the Walbrucks.

"I regret to say there seems to have been a leak," he said. "All the communications media are here."

"Conrad was promised!" Mrs. Walbruck said.

"Perhaps we can get him past them without their knowing who he is," Chambrun said.

"What nonsense!" Mrs. Walbruck exclaimed. "They all know him by sight."

"But not without his beard, wouldn't you say, Mrs. Walbruck?"

Chambrun didn't wait for an answer. I couldn't believe what I saw. He reached out, grabbed the white beard in his hand, and gave it a strong yank.

It came off!

"Now, madam, perhaps you wouldn't mind answering a question," Chambrun said, in his hanging-judge's voice. "Where *is* Dr. Walbruck?"

Chambrun sat behind the flat-topped desk in his office, sipping a cup of Turkish coffee, a Cheshire Cat smile on his lips. The roof-top fiddler in the original Chagall painting on the opposite wall seemed to be chuckling with delight. I was there, along with Jerry Dodd and Miss Ruysdale. The police had already taken Mrs. Walbruck and her unexpectedly beardless companion into custody.

"Ours is a business of detail," Chambrun said, lighting one of his flat Egyptian cigarettes. "When something goes wrong it's a matter of routine with me to check every small detail, hoping for answers. I sent you with them to the U.N., Mark, just to be sure the doctor didn't vanish into thin air while I checked."

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He leaned forward and pushed a slip of paper to within my reach. I looked at it, with Jerry and Miss Ruysdale peering over my shoulder. It was a penciled list:

Toothpaste
Aspirin
Spirit Gum
Sleeping pill prescription
Kleenex
Medium toothbrush
Shaving cream

"That," Chambrun said, "is the list of things Mrs. Walbruck bought at the drug store this morning. Interesting? Who was to use the shaving cream? The bearded Dr. Walbruck? It occurred to me, Ruysdale, that women do sometimes use razors—to shave their legs. It was possible the shaving cream was for the lady. Just possible."

"But the spirit gum!" Jerry Dodd said.

"Precisely," Chambrun said. "Spirit gum is a substance that actors use to fasten on false hair—beards, mustaches, sideburns. A small detail—but revealing. And so—and so—" Chambrun sighed and sipped his coffee.

"The Mosely girl inadvertently saw the man without his beard," Jerry said.

"I think not," Chambrun said. "Mrs. Walbruck met the girl in the lobby. She couldn't turn her away. If she did, it might arouse suspicion. The man posing as Dr. Walbruck—who, incidentally, turns out to be Mrs. Walbruck's brother—would not come out of the bedroom if there was anyone with Mrs. Walbruck. But something went wrong. The rooms, as you know, are soundproofed. Mrs. Walbruck let herself and the Mosely girl in with a key. No sound of the doorbell. So the imposter wasn't aware there was anyone with his sister. He appeared—not without his beard, Jerry, but as he told us a few minutes ago, with half of it on!"

"Sweet Sue," Jerry said. "He sure couldn't talk his way out of that!"

"So he took off that half of the beard, then escorted Miss Mosely down the hall with a gun in her ribs—you remember Mrs. Kniffin said they were walking close together and the girl wasn't laughing any more? She wasn't laughing because she was on her way to an open window and her death."

"But the speech!" I said. "I heard it. No stand-in could have made that speech."

"A stand-in could *make* the speech if the real Dr. Walbruck had written it," Chambrun said. He smiled. "I would like to continue to dazzle you by saying I knew the answer. I didn't. The police got it from Gretchen Walbruck. The good doctor died the day before they were to take

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off for this country. His speech was already written. He was prepared to make the great effort—the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. He, quite simply, had died in his sleep."

"But why the fraud?" Miss Ruysdale asked. "They wanted the work to go on? Was that it?"

"My dear Ruysdale, you are the supreme sentimentalist," Chambrun said. "Dr. Walbruck was a saint. He was one of the few men in the world to whom hard-headed businessmen would give millions of dollars without comptrollers and accountants and committees to supervise its spending. Just over the rainbow there were millions of dollars to be had by Mrs. Walbruck and her brother if they could carry out the fake for a very few days." Chambrun put out his cigarette in the silver ashtray on his desk. "Well, my friends," he said briskly, "we have a hotel to run."

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The intrigue of the frightened man appealed to Owen Foler (as did the fat fee, of course). So as usual he sent his legman, Woodie Charing, to round up every colleague of the frightened man. And in the ensuing confrontation the sedentary sleuth with the serpentine brain unraveled the truth . . .

THE FRIGHTENED MAN

by O. X. RUSETT

I WAS MAD AT FOLER THAT DAY, which was nothing new, but I didn't know what to do about it, which was. Uusally I can find some effective way to needle him, but at the moment I'd drawn a blank.

Which explains why I almost forgot to be observant when I answered the door to admit a shriveled little man who looked like a wrinkled pear—I was still preoccupied with how to get back at Foler. But a natural talent for observation honed to a fine edge by long training doesn't get derailed that easily, and I could see that the little man was disturbed and that his left hand was tightly clutching something inside his coat pocket. I half hoped he'd let go when I took the coat from him; but no, he just transferred the fist to the pocket of his jacket.

I ushered in the client—I was already thinking of him as one although he hadn't told me his business with us, had just handed me his card which read Chet Telin, Theatrical Agent. I knew Foler wouldn't be in the office for a while, and naturally it was Owen Foler he wanted to see. I'm Woodie Charing, and a pretty good detective myself, but that's not usually enough for our clients.

This one was so itchy, though, that he did talk to me after all.

"This is urgent, Mr. Charing. I think someone in my household intends to kill me, and I'm running out of time. When will Mr. Foler be here?"

His voice didn't sound like a wrinkled pear—if wrinkled pears could talk, of course. It was deep and resonant, really surprising. The kind of guy who could make it big on radio and be killed by television. While I was at it, I did some more observing. He was

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expensively dressed, which was a definite plus, implying a fat fee, and he did look scared. I relented.

"Mr. Foler should be able to see you shortly," I said reassuringly. "In the meantime you're safe here."

He glanced around as if he expected to see a sinister relative pop out from behind a picture frame, but he nodded. I headed for the kitchen extension, not wanting him to hear the delicate way I would state his problem to Foler. Brent Firrenz was there, doing something with pots and pans that produced a tantalizing aroma.

I telephoned upstairs to the plant rooms.

"There's a rich bozo here who expects to be bumped off," I told the telephone. "I think he has a threatening note in his pocket. It looks like money for us."

A grunt, as I could have predicted, came over the telephone.

"I'll be down at six. Tell him to wait and I'll see him then."

I could have predicted that too. Foler always stays with his orchids till six, with some exceptions too rare to mention, and the mere threat of murder certainly isn't one of them. It was now twenty of six, which was why I had informed Mr. Telin that Foler would be there soon.

I went back and conveyed the message again, and sat down at my desk to wait. Eventually the numerous pounds-worth which was Foler hove in and seated itself behind the other desk. He glanced at Telin's card, which I had thoughtfully put there.

"Well, Mr. Telin, what can I do for you?" he asked, in a not particularly gracious manner.

"Mr. Foler, I think someone in my household is trying to kill me. I want you to find out who it is in time to—uh—prevent it."

He had trouble with that one, but I suppose the prospect of having one's life taken away isn't pleasant.

"What makes you think so?" Foler asked.

"This note." And sure enough he finally drew the fist out of his pocket and handed over what was in it. Foler looked, raised his eyebrows a hundredth of an inch, and handed it to me.

It was one of those paste-up jobs of letters cut from newspapers and it said: *Your time has run out. You will die.*

"It didn't occur to you, Mr. Telin, that this might be a practical joke?" Foler asked.

"It did not. There is much bitterness toward me at home. In a way I own them all, and they resent it." There was something slightly European about his speech.

"Who are the people concerned?"

"First, my wife. Sue Pos is the name she goes by on her television

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interview program. My sister Tressi is a television actress. I'm agent for both of them. My brother Charim—that is a stage name too—is a - er - a lecturer in philosophy, you might say. Sheree Pouke keeps house for me. She has been with my family since my childhood. That is all—four of them."

"What do you want me to do?"

He thought about that one. It was as if he had expected that when he got through naming them, Foler would pick one; and it hadn't occurred to him, until Foler asked, that it wouldn't be that easy.

"Can you come over and talk to them?"

I smiled to myself. The little man didn't know what he was asking. Foler never, and I mean never, goes out. At least, like with the plants, the exceptions are too rare to count.

Foler merely said that would be impossible, and Telin should get them all over here. The client raised some objections to that—he was really afraid to go home with someone on the loose wanting to murder him, and I couldn't blame him. So, after settling the fee—to my entire satisfaction—it was agreed that I would go with him, collect the whole kit and caboodle, and bring them back with me. That left Foler with nothing to do in the meantime but drink beer, but that couldn't be helped.

Telin had a Rolls-Royce and a chauffeur outside (hired by the day—not part of the household), which made up a little for my having to miss the dinner that Brent was cooking, and we glided smoothly through New York to one of the last of the Manhattan mansions.

He used his key when we got to the door, and let us both in. The hallway was dark, and Telin hadn't taken more than a few steps when he stumbled, knocking me off balance since I was right behind him. He must have pressed a light switch next, for the foyer suddenly sprang into view, revealing what Telin had stumbled over.

Lying kind of bunched up in front of us was a man—or rather, what was left of him; which was the lifeless body. One look was enough to see that the vital force was no longer in it, and the bullet hole in the forehead showed why.

I shot a quick glance at Telin, who looked merely puzzled, as at some inexplicable but at the same time unimportant question. Well, after all, it wasn't *his* corpse, and that was what he was afraid of.

"Do you often find a dead body in your foyer?" I couldn't resist asking.

"What? No, of course not," he spoke absently. "I don't understand it. I don't even know who he is." He seemed really perplex-

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ed, though he might have brought us in deliberately as some kind of fall guys—murderers will do the screwiest things—and I couldn't rule it out.

In any event, I wasn't too pleased. I could guess the attitude of the police at my being on the spot, and it wasn't a pleasant prospect. They never will understand that I'm as honest and helpful as a Boy Scout.

Still, there was nothing for it but to call them, and I asked the way to the nearest phone. It was in a room full of people, and I looked them over as I muttered into the mouthpiece. After one curious glance they paid no attention to me, but clustered around Telin and asked him where he'd been. He sank wearily onto a sofa and didn't tell them. He didn't tell them about our interesting discovery in the foyer either.

It is a measure of how perturbed I was that I didn't give the two women in the room more than a quick look. Usually I'm happy if a case has even one, but I didn't like the way this case was shaping up. One of the women was petite, a little shorter than I like them, but generously enough endowed to make up for it. The other was tall and dark and willowy. There was a man there too, if you could call him that—as small and shriveled as Telin himself, wearing nothing but a sheet, so help me. He didn't look the type for playing ghosts and besides, it was way past Halloween.

I called Foler and reported, and then I was introduced to the cast of characters. The small woman was Mrs. Telin, or Sue Pos, whichever you prefer, and she had intelligence to match her looks. She didn't act very friendly toward her husband, and took a dim view of my being there too.

The tall one was warmer. She had a brilliant smile for me, and I would have liked to pursue the matter further, but business came first.

The other little man, speaking in a funny singsong, identified himself as a guru. So that was the brother, the lecturer in philosophy. Since I had the idea that gurus come from India, and the Telins from Europe, I wondered how much of a fakir he was.

Our visit was cut short by the arrival of the police. I had taken the time to have them all look at the body, and to explore it myself before that. I found a name, Ed Dobaday, on an envelope, and little else. He was young and good-looking in a sleazy sort of way. There wasn't a clue as to how he had made his living—though, whatever it was, he wouldn't be doing it any more.

They all insisted they'd never

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seen him before, but beautiful Tressi wasn't very convincing. The guru I don't count; *he* wasn't convincing when he said it was raining, even though it was.

While I had been trying to get a line on these people, Telin had slipped out of the room. I let him go. It must have been to alert the housekeeper, because the first I saw of her she was ushering in the police, and she must have let them in through the foyer, but she didn't look surprised.

She was really a dish—she made the other women look pale. She had vivid good looks—jet-black hair and snapping black eyes fringed with thick lashes. You could hardly call her the old-family-retainer type.

I got the kind of greeting from the force I expected—you'd think my old friends, Inspector Price Cromarsten and Sergeant Buster P. Binsley, would have welcomed another professional on the spot, but they never looked at it that way, and gave me a cold "Hello, Woodie," for openers.

I'll skip the next part, because it didn't get us very far, except that the police found a large pile of cut-up newspapers in an unused storeroom, from which the threatening note had been composed.

Eventually the police left and I was able to get the whole crowd over to Foler—my original mission, and one that had a lot more point now. I managed a few minutes alone with him to make a fast report before I brought them into our office.

I got them seated, enjoying the look on Foler's face when he had three women facing him, when he hates to have even one.

"You are here," he began bluntly, "for two reasons. One, somebody threatened to kill Telin, and the fact that someone else is dead doesn't cancel that out, as far as we know.

"Second, a man named Ed Dobaday was found dead in your house. You all had the opportunity to kill him, and killing seems to have been on someone's mind."

Telin—our client, that is, not the guru—looked interested. He was pretty tough in his own way. He might be scared of being killed, but he wasn't letting it reduce him to open panic. Under the nervousness there seemed to be an assurance he would find out what he needed to know, and the would-be killer would never succeed. Meantime, he was analytically cold toward the rest of them.

"Mrs. Telin," Foler invited, "Woodie tells me you have a good interview program on television. That takes insight. Suppose you start, telling us about all of you."

That was a switch. He didn't like to hear from women usually, but Telin seemed already to have told us all he wanted to, and

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the other male was a little *outré* for Foler's tastes, swathed in his sheet as he still was.

"I haven't been married to Chet very long." It was a beautiful husky voice. "He was my agent—that's how I knew him—and we were married two years ago. He and Tressi and—Charim—came over from Poland five years ago. With Sheree, of course." She flashed the housekeeper a cool hostile glance. "He did well as an agent almost at once—really launched Tressi on her career. I myself owe everything to him." She sounded as if she meant it, but only partly.

"Charim went to school for a while, but dropped out of sight and then turned up as a guru. He's been lecturing on the West Coast—showed up a week ago, without bag or baggage, for a visit. As you may imagine, he's rather a noncomformist."

"I am interested in inner harmony," interrupted the odd singsong. "The material things do not matter."

"You are interested in material food," snapped Sheree Pouke. "Caviar, no less." She had a strong accent. "And you are all the time going out, in good material clothes.

"Meester Foler," she turned to him, "I do not understand thees. I live always with the Telins. They take me in as an orphan. I repay by running the house, here. I love Meester Telin. *That* one," she amended, nodding toward her employer.

"Miss Telin, we haven't heard from you," Foler said.

The tall girl slowly uncrossed and recrossed her legs, which was wasted on Foler, but not on me.

"My brother has been very good to me," she said slowly. "Perhaps his ambitions are hard to live up to at times, but no one would want to kill him."

"That's not what *he* says," probed Foler, but he got no takers. Blank faces returned his questioning look.

"Miss Telin," he rapped out next, "where have you seen the dead man before?"

"But I—" she started, then changed her tactics. "Oh, what's the difference? He's a TV actor too—not very successful. I haven't seen him around for a long time, and I heard he'd gone to Hollywood to have a try at movies. I hardly knew him."

I started to speak, but when I saw Foler's lips moving, pushing in and out, in and out, I changed my mind. When he does that he's really thinking, and I'm not about to disturb the process.

He looked as if he had the answers, and then the phone rang. He picked it up, and I lifted my extension. The voice of Alan Spurze, who does a lot of investigation for us and is the best in the business, came crackling

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over the wire. Foler must have called him after I made my report from the Telin house.

"Yes, that's what I expected," Foler grunted, when he had heard the report. "Thanks."

He faced them again.

"Dobaday was also a petty crook. His speciality was blackmail. Any comment? No? Pfui. Then I'll tell *you* what happened.

"Telin thought his life had been threatened. Any of you might have wanted to kill him. But there was always another possibility, and it's the true one. That note was never intended for Telin. You found it in your pocket?"

Telin nodded, surprised.

"Very well. We've heard that this faker here"—and he meant faker with an e, not an i—"has been going out well-dressed. I take it that doesn't mean a bedsheet. But he arrived only in that costume of his—no bag or baggage.

"It's a reasonable assumption that he's been wearing his brother's clothes. They're the same size. Think about the note being in *Charim's* pocket and see where that gets us.

"Was *he* being threatened? I think not. On the contrary, he was the threatener. The connection between you and the blackmailer can be established," he snapped at the guru who, small to start with, seemed to be shrinking before our eyes. "You came to your brother because you were frightened, or because you ran out of money after this Dobaday bled you. People who believe in gurus don't like to find out they come from Europe. Any such information had to be hushed up, or it would write finis to a lucrative career. You were trying to scare him off with threatening notes—this wasn't the first; it was the latest and you hadn't got around to sending it when your brother happened to wear his own jacket, found it, and took it personally, not having too clear a conscience himself.

"But Dobaday hadn't scared that easily, and when he came for you, you got rid of him the only way you could think of."

"You're crazy," Charim Telin said, in a voice that was no longer singsong, but straight narrative. "You can't prove it."

"The police can," Foler growled. "Anyway, you're the only one with the name for the murderer."

Foler turned out to be right as usual. When the police knew where to look, they had little trouble pinning it on Charim good and tight. I tried to make a date with Sheree Pouke, but she insisted she had to get back to her housekeeping. It was only a half-hearted effort by my usual standards, anyhow. I was thinking of something else.

What had Foler meant, that Charim Telin has the name for the murderer?

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'm sure the reader is far ahead of me and knows all the answers, even if Archie—oops, I mean Woodie—doesn't. Charim Telin anagrams to "the criminal." I'm sure too that everyone recognized orchid-growing Owen Foler as the great Nero Wolfe, with sidekick Archie Goodwin scrambled to read Woodie Charing. And, of course, all the others:

Chet Telin = the client
Tressi = sister
Sue Pos = spouse
Sheree Pouke = housekeeper
Ed Dobaday = a dead body

and from the cast of Nero Wolfe's regulars:

Brent Firrenz = Fritz Brenner
Price Cromarsten = Inspector Cramer
Buster P. Binsley = Purley Stebbins
Alan Spurze = Saul Panzer

and of course the author, whom I've called O. X. Rusett, who graciously said he would like me to do a takeoff on his creation: the first two initials hint at both his own first name and the bulk of his famous hero—thus

O. X. Rusett = Rex Stout

NORMA SCHIER

CRIMINALIMERICKS

SCHIER IMPUDENCE

by D. R. BENSEN

A new thriller, "Heroin, Scram!"
From talented Rosie N. Chram;
The publishing firm
Is Arconi & Sherm —
So much for this month's Normagram.

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a NERO WOLFE detective SHORT NOVEL by

REX STOUT

complete in this issue

Take a murder by poison in the presence of five suspects, add a concerned aunt and uncle, stir in a dash of the NYPD and a garnish of the FBI, hand the whole concoction to Nero Wolfe as a substitute for his favorite beer—and you're likely to make the great Nero unhappy. But he needed money, and detecting was his vocation.

One of Nero Wolfe's most challenging problems, and one of Archie Goodwin's breeziest narrations—a short novel complete in this issue . . .

NERO WOLFE DEVISES A STRATAGEM

by REX STOUT

"OUR NEPHEW ARTHUR WAS the romantic type," said Mrs. Benjamin Rackell with the least possible movement of her thin tight lips. "He thought being a Communist was romantic."

Nero Wolfe, behind his desk in his outsized chair that thought nothing of his seventh of a ton, scowled at her. I, at my own desk with a notebook and pen, permitted myself a private grin, not unsympathetic. Wolfe was controlling himself under severe provocation. The appointment for Mr. Rackell to call at Wolfe's office on the ground floor of his brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street, at six p.m., had been made by phone by a secretary in the office of the Rackell Importing Company, and nothing had been said about a wife coming along. And the wife, no treat as a spectacle to begin with, was an interrupter and a cliché tosser,

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enough to make Wolfe scowl at any man, let alone a woman.

"But," he objected, not too caustic, "you say that he was not a Communist, that, on the contrary, he was acting for the FBI when he joined the Communist party."

He would have loved to tell her to get lost. But his house had five stories, counting the basement and the plant rooms full of orchids on the roof, and there was Fritz the chef and Theodore the botanist and me, Archie Goodwin, the fairly confidential assistant, with nothing to carry the load but his income as a private detective, and the Rackell check for three thousand bucks, offered as a retainer, was under a paperweight on his desk.

"That's just it," Mrs. Rackell said impatiently. "Isn't it romantic to work for the FBI? But that wasn't why he did it; he did it to serve his country, and that's why they killed him. His being the romantic type had nothing to do with it."

Wolfe made a face and undertook to bypass her. His eyes went to Rackell. She would probably have called her husband the stubby type, with his short arms and legs, but he was no runt. His trunk was long and broad and his head long and narrow. His eyes pointed down at the corners, and so did his mouth, making him look mournful.

Wolfe asked him, "Have you spoken with the FBI, Mr. Rackell?"

But the wife answered. "No, he hasn't," she said. "I went myself yesterday and I never heard anything to equal it. They wouldn't tell me a single thing. They wouldn't even admit Arthur was working for them as a spy for his country! They said it was a matter for the New York police and I should talk to them—as if I hadn't!"

"I told you, Pauline," Rackell said mildly but not timidly, "that the FBI won't tell people things. And the police won't either, not when it's murder, and especially when the Communists come into it. That's why I insisted on coming to Nero Wolfe to find out what's going on. If the FBI doesn't want it known that Arthur was with them, even if it means not getting his murderer, what else can you expect?"

"I expect justice!" Mrs. Rackell declared, her lips actually moving visibly.

I gave it a line to itself in the notebook.

Wolfe was frowning at Rackell. "There seems to be some confusion. I understood that you want a murder investigated. Now you say you came to me to find out what's going on. If you mean you want me to investigate the police and the FBI, that's too big a bite."

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"I didn't say that," Rackell protested.

"No, but clear it up. What do you want?"

Rackell's down-pointing eyes looked even mournfuller. "We want facts," he declared. "I think the police and the FBI are quite capable of sacrificing the rights of a private citizen to what they consider the public interest. Our nephew was murdered, and my wife had a right to ask them what line they're proceeding on, and they wouldn't tell her. I don't intend to just let it go at that. Is this a democracy or isn't it? I'm not—"

"No!" the wife snapped. "It's not a democracy, it's a republic."

"I suggest," said Wolfe, exasperated, "that I recapitulate to see if I have it straight. I'll combine what I have read in the papers with what you have told me." He focused on the wife, probably figuring that she would be less apt to cut in if he held her eye. "Arthur Rackell, your husband's orphaned nephew, was a fairly efficient employee of his importing business, drawing a good salary, living at your home here in New York, on Sixty-eighth Street. Some three years ago you noted that he was taking a radically leftist position in discussions of political and social questions, and you remonstrated without effect. As time passed he became more leftist and more outspoken, until his opinions and arguments were identical with the Communist line. You, both you and your husband, argued with him and entreated him, but—"

"I did," Mrs. Rackell snapped. "My husband didn't."

"Now, Pauline," Rackell protested. "I argued with him some." He looked at Wolfe. "I didn't entreat him because I didn't think I had a right to. I don't believe in entreating people about their convictions. I was paying him a salary and I didn't want him to think he had to—" The importer fluttered a hand. "I liked Arthur, and he was my brother's son."

"In any case," Wolfe went on brusquely, still at the wife, "he did not change. He stubbornly adhered to the Communist position. He applauded the Communist attack in Korea and denounced the action of the United Nations. You finally found it insufferable and gave him an ultimatum: either he would abandon his outrageous—"

"Not an ultimatum," Mrs. Rackell corrected. "My husband refused to permit it. I merely—"

Wolfe outspoke her. "At least you made it plain that you had had enough and he was no longer welcome in your home. You must have made it fairly strong, since he was moved to disclose an extremely tight secret: that he had been persuaded by the FBI, back in nineteen forty-eight, to join the

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Communist party for the purpose of espionage. No easy admonition would have dragged that out of him, surely."

"I didn't say it was easy. I told him—" She stopped, and the thin lips really did tighten. She relaxed them enough to let words out. "I think he thought he would lose his job, and he was well paid. Much more than he earned, the amount of work he did."

Wolfe nodded. "Anyhow, he told you his secret and you promised to keep it, becoming a confederate. Privately admiring him, with others you had to pretend to maintain your condemnation. You told your husband and no one else. That was about a week ago, you say?"

"Yes."

"And Saturday evening, three days ago, your nephew was murdered. Now to that. You have added little to what the papers have carried, but let's see. He left the apartment, your home, and took a taxi to Chezar's restaurant, where he had a dinner engagement. He had invited three women and two men to dine with him, and they were all there when he arrived, in the bar. When your nephew came they went with him to the table he had reserved and had cocktails. He took a small metal box from—"

"Gold."

"Gold is a metal, madam. He took it from a pocket, his side coat pocket, put it on the table, and left it there while he conferred with the waiter. There was conversation. When plates and rolls and butter were brought, the pillbox got pushed around. It was on the table altogether some ten or twelve minutes. When hors d'oeuvres were served, your nephew started to eat, remembered the pillbox, found it behind the basket of rolls, got from it a vitamin capsule, swallowed the capsule with a sip of water, and began on his hors d'oeuvres. Six or seven minutes later he suddenly cried out, sprang to his feet, overturning his chair, made convulsive gestures, became rigid, collapsed and crumpled to the floor, and died. A doctor arrived shortly, but your nephew was already dead. It has been found that two other capsules in the metal box, similar in appearance to the one he took, contained what they were supposed to and were harmless; but your nephew had swallowed potassium cyanide. He was murdered by replacing a vitamin capsule with a capsule filled with poison."

"Certainly. That's what—"

"I'll go on, please. You were and are convinced that the substitution was made by one of his dinner companions who is a Communist and who learned that your nephew was acting for the FBI, and you so informed Inspector Cramer of the police. You were not satisfied with his ac-

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ceptance of that information, especially in a subsequent talk with him yesterday morning, Monday, and went to the office of the FBI, saw a Mr. Anstrey, and found him noncommittal. He took the position that a homicide in Manhattan is the business of the New York police. Exasperated, you went to Inspector Cramer's office, were unable to see him, talked with a sergeant named Stebbins, came away further exasperated, regarded with favor your husband's suggestion, made this morning, that I be consulted, and here you are. Have I left out anything important?"

"One little point." Rackell cleared his throat. "Our telling Inspector Cramer about Arthur's joining the Communist party for the FBI—that was in confidence. Of course this talk with you is confidential too, naturally, since we're your clients."

Wolfe shook his head. "Not yet. You want to hire me to investigate the death of your nephew?"

"Yes. Certainly."

"Then you should know that while no one excels me in discretion I will not work under restrictions."

"That's fair enough."

"Good. I'll let you know tomorrow, probably by noon." Wolfe reached to push the paperweight aside and pick up the check. "Shall I keep this meanwhile and return it if I can't take the job?"

Rackell frowned, perplexed. His wife snapped, "Why on earth couldn't you take it?"

"I don't know, madam. I hope to. I need the money. But I'll have to look into it a little—discreetly, of course. I'll let you know tomorrow at the latest." He extended a hand with the check. "Unless you prefer to take this and try elsewhere."

They didn't like it, especially her. She even left the red leather chair to take the check, her lips tight, but after some give-and-take with her husband they decided to let it ride, and she put the check back on the desk. They wanted to give us more details, especially about their nephew's five dinner guests, but Wolfe said that could wait, and they left, none too pleased. As I let them out at the front door Rackell gave me a polite thank-you nod, but she didn't even know I was there.

Returning to the office, I got the check and put it in the safe and then stood to regard Wolfe. His nose was twitching. He looked as if he had an oyster with horseradish on it in his mouth; a combination he detests.

"It can't be helped," I told him. "It takes all kinds to make a clientele. What are we going to look into a little?"

He sighed. "Get Mr. Wengert of the FBI. You want to see him,

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this evening if possible. I'll talk."

"It's nearly seven o'clock."

"Try."

I went to the phone on my desk, dialed RE 2-3500, talked to a stranger and to a man I had met a couple of times, and reported to Wolfe, "Not available. Tomorrow morning."

"Make an appointment."

I did so and hung up.

Wolfe sat scowling at me. He spoke. "I'll give you instructions after dinner. Have we got the *Gazette* of the past three days?"

"Sure."

"Let me have them, please. Confound it." He sighed again. "Saturday, and tomorrow's Wednesday. Like a warmed-over meal." He came erect and his face brightened. "I wonder how Fritz is making out with that fish."

He left his chair and headed for the hall and the kitchen.

Wednesday morning all the air in Manhattan was conditioned—the wrong way. It was no place for penguins. On my way to Foley Square my jacket was beside me on the seat of the taxi, but when I had paid the driver and got out I put it on. Sweat or no sweat, I had to show the world a private detective can be tough enough to take it.

When, after some waiting, I got admitted to Wengert's big corner room I found him in his shirt sleeves with his tie and collar loosened. He got up to shake hands and invited me to sit. We exchanged remarks.

"I haven't seen you," I told him, "since you got elevated here. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. I notice you've got brass in your voice, but I guess that can't be helped. Mr. Wolfe sends his regards."

"Give him mine." His voice warmed up a little, just perceptibly. "I'll never forget how he came through on that mercury thing." He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "What can I do for you, Goodwin?"

Back a few years, when we had been in G2 together, it had been Archie, but then he hadn't had a corner room with five phones on his desk. I crossed my legs to show there was no rush.

"Not a thing," I told him. "Mr. Wolfe just wants to clear. Yesterday a man and wife named Rackell came to see him. They want to investigate the death of their nephew, Arthur Rackell. Do you know about it, or do you want to call someone in? Mrs. Rackell has talked with a Mr. Anstrey."

"I know. Go ahead."

"Then I won't have to draw pictures. Our bank says that Rackell rates seven figures west of the decimal point, and we would like to earn a fee by tagging a murderer, but our country right

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or wrong. We would hate to torpedo the ship of state in this bad weather. The Rackells came to Mr. Wolfe because they think the FBI and the NYPD regard the death of Arthur as a regrettable but minor incident. They say he was killed by a Commie who discovered that he was an FBI plant. Before we proceed on that theory Mr. Wolfe wants to clear with you. Of course you may not want to say, even under the rug to us, that he was yours. May you?"

"It's hotter than yesterday," Wengert stated.

"Yeah. Would you care to make any sign at all, for instance a wink?"

"No."

"Then I'll try something more general. There has been nothing in the papers about the Commie angle, not a word, so there has been no mention of the FBI. Is the FBI working on the murder, officially or otherwise?"

"Much hotter," he said.

"It sure is. How about the others, the five dinner guests? Of course they're our meat. Any suggestions, requests, or orders? Any strings you wouldn't want us to trip on?"

"The humidity, too."

"Absolutely. I realize that you would like to tell us to lay off on general principles, but you're afraid there might be a headline tomorrow, FBI WARNS NERO WOLFE TO KEEP HANDS OFF RACKELL MURDER. Besides, if you give us a stop sign you'll have to say why or we'll keep going. Just to clean it up is there any question I might ask that would take your mind off the weather?"

"No." He stood up. "It was nice to see you for old times' sake, and you can still give Wolfe my regards, but tell him to go climb a tree. Some nerve. Sending you here with that bull about wanting to clear! Why didn't he ask me to send him up the files? Come again when I'm not here."

I was on my way, but before I reached the door I turned. "The radio said this morning it would hit ninety-five," I told him and went.

There are always taxis at Foley Square. I removed my jacket, climbed into one, and gave an address on West Twentieth Street. When we got there my shirt was stuck to the back of the seat. I pulled loose, paid, got out, put on the jacket, and went into a building. The headquarters of the Homicide Squad, Manhattan West, was much more familiar to me than the United States Courthouse. So were the inmates, one in particular, the one sitting at a dingy little desk in a dingy little room to which I was escorted. They have never let me roam loose in that building since the day I took a snapshot of a

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piece of paper they were saving, though they couldn't prove it.

Sergeant Purley Stebbins was big and strong but not handsome. His rusty old swivel chair squeaked and groaned as he leaned back.

"Oh, hell," I said, sitting, "I forgot. I meant to bring a can of oil for that chair my next trip here." I cocked my head. "What are you glaring about? Is my face dirty?"

"It don't have to be dirty." He went on glaring. "Damn it, why did they have to pick Nero Wolfe?"

I considered a moment, maybe two seconds. "I am glad to know," I said pleasantly, "that the cops and the Feds are collaborating so closely. Citizens can sleep sound. Wengert must have phoned the minute I left. What did he say?"

"He spoke to the Inspector. What do you want?"

"Maybe I should speak to the Inspector."

"He's busy. So the Rackells have hired Wolfe?"

I lifted my nose. "Mr. and Mrs. Rackell have asked Mr. Wolfe to investigate the death of their nephew. Before he starts to whiz through it like a cyclone he wants to know whether he will be cramping the style of those responsible for the national security. I've seen Wengert, and the heat has got him. He's not interested. I am now seeing you because of the Commie angle, which has not appeared in the papers. If it is against the public interest for us to take the job tell me why. I know you and Cramer think it's against the public interest for us to eat, let alone detect, but that's not enough. We would need facts."

"Uh-huh," Purley growled. "We give 'em to you and Wolfe decides he can use 'em better than we can. Nuts. I'll tell you one fact: this one has got stingers. Lay off."

I nodded sympathetically. "That's probably good advice. I'll tell Mr. Wolfe." I arose. "We would like you to sign a statement covering the substance of this interview. Three copies, one—"

"Go somewhere," he rasped. "On out. Beat it."

I thought he was getting careless, but my escort, a paunchy old veteran with a pushed-in nose, was waiting in the hall. As I strode to the front and the entrance he waddled along behind.

It was past eleven by the time I got back to the office, so Wolfe had finished his two hours in the plant rooms and was behind his desk, with beer. It would have been impossible for anything with life in it to look less like a cyclone.

"Well?" he muttered at me.

I sat. "We deposit the check. Wengert sends his regards. Purley doesn't. They both think you sent

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me merely to get the dope for free and they sneer at the idea of our caring for the public welfare. Wengert phoned Cramer the minute I left. Not a peep from either one. We only know what we see in the papers."

He grunted. "Get Mr. Rackell."

So we had a case.

There were two open questions about the seven people gathered in the office after dinner that Wednesday evening: were any of them Commies, and was one of them a murderer? I make it seven, including our clients, not to seem prejudiced.

I had given them the eye as they arrived and gathered and now, as I sat at my desk with them all in sight, I was placing no bets. There had been a time, years back, when I had had the notion that no murderer, man or woman, could stand exposed to view and not let it show somewhere if you had good enough eyes, but now I knew better. However, I used my eyes.

The one nearest me was a lanky middle-aged guy named Ormond Leddegard. He may have been expert at handling labor-management relations, which was how he made a living, but he was a fumbler with his fingers. Getting out a pack of cigarettes, and matches, and lighting up, he was all thumbs, and that would have put him low on the list if it hadn't been for the possibility that he was being subtle. If I could figure that thumbs wouldn't have been up to the job of sneaking a pillbox from a cluttered table, making a substitution, and returning the box without detection, so could he. Of course that little point could be easily settled by having a good man, say Saul Panzer, spend a couple of days interviewing a dozen or so of his friends and acquaintances.

Next to him, with her legs crossed just right to be photographed from any angle, was Fifi Goheen. The leg-crossing technique was automatic, from an old habit. Seven or eight years ago she had been Deb of the Year and no magazine would have dared go to press without a shot of her; then it became all a memory; and now she was a front-page item as a murder suspect. She hadn't married. It was said that a hundred males, lured by the attractions, opening their mouths for the big proposition, had seen the hard glint in her lovely dark eyes, and lost their tongues. So she was still Miss Fifi Goheen, living with Pop and Mom on Park Avenue.

Beyond her in the arc facing Wolfe's desk was Benjamin Rackell, whose check had been deposited in our bank that afternoon, with his long narrow face more mournful even than the day before. At his right was a spe-

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cimen who was a female anatomically but otherwise a what-is-it. Her name was Della Devlin, and her age was beside the point. She was a resident buyer of novelties for out-of-town stores. There are ten thousand of her in midtown New York any weekday, and they're all being imposed on. You see it in their faces. The problem is to find out who it is that's imposing on them, and some day I may tackle it. Aside from that there was nothing visibly wrong with Della Devlin, except her ears were too big.

Next to her was a celebrity—though of course they were all celebrities for the time being, you might say *ex officio*. Henry Jameson Heath, now crowding fifty, had inherited money in his youth, quite a pile, but very few people in his financial bracket were speaking to him. There was no telling whether he had contributed dough to the Communist party or cause, or if so how much, but there was no secret about his being one of the chief providers and collecters of bail for the Commies who had been indicted. He had recently been indicted too, for contempt of Congress, and was probably headed for a modest stretch. He wore an old seersucker suit that was too small for him, had a round pudgy face, and couldn't look at you without staring.

Beyond Heath, at the end of the arc, was Carol Berk, the only one toward whom I had a personal attitude worth mentioning. Whenever we have a flock of guests I handle the seating, and if there is one who seems worthy of study I put her in the chair nearest mine. I had done so with this Carol Berk, but while I was in the hall admitting Leddegard, who had come last, she had switched on me, and I resented it. I felt that she deserved attention. Checking on her, along with the others, that afternoon with Lon Cohen of the *Gazette*, I had learned that she was supposed to be free-lancing as a TV contact specialist but no one actually claimed her, that she had a reputation as an extremely fast mover, and that there were six different versions of why she had left Hollywood three years ago. Added to that was the question whether it was a pleasure to look at her or not. In cases where it's a quick no, the big majority, or a quick yes, the small minority, that settles it and what the hell; but the borderline numbers take application and sound judgment. I had listed Carol Berk as one when, crossing the doorsill, she had darted a sidewise glance at me with brown eyes that were dead dull from the front. Now, in the chair she had changed to, she was a good five paces away.

Mrs. Benjamin Rackell, her lips tighter than ever, was in the red

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leather chair at the end of Wolfe's desk.

Wolfe's gaze swept the arc. "I won't thank you for coming," he rumbled at them, "because it would be impertinent. You are here at the request of Mr. and Mrs. Rackell. Whether you came to oblige them or because you thought it unwise not to is immaterial."

Also, it seemed to me, it was close to immaterial whether they were there or not. Apparently, since he had sent me to Foley Square and Homicide to clear, Wolfe was proceeding on the Rackell theory that Arthur had got it because a Commie or Commies had discovered that he was an FBI plant. But that theory had not been published, and Wolfe couldn't blurt it out. You don't disclose the identity of FBI undercover men, even dead ones, if you make your living as a private detective and want to keep your license. And if by chance Arthur had fed his aunt one with a worm in it, if he had actually had no more connection with the FBI than me with the DAR—no, that was one to steer clear of.

So not only could Wolfe not come to the point, he couldn't even let out a hint of what the point was. How could he talk at all?

He talked. "I don't know," he said, "whether the police have made it clear to you how you stand. They don't like it that I'm taking a hand in this. The entrance to my house has been under surveillance since this morning, when they learned that Mr. and Mrs. Rackell had consulted me. One or more of you were probably followed here this evening. But Mr. Rackell may properly hire me, I may properly work for him, and you may properly give me information if you feel like it."

"We don't know whether we do or not." Leddegard shifted in his chair, stretching his lanky legs. "At least I don't. I came as a courtesy to people in bereavement."

"It is appreciated," Wolfe assured him. "Now for how you stand I talked with Mr. and Mrs. Rackell yesterday, and with Mrs. Rackell again this afternoon. It is characteristic of the newspapers to focus attention on you five people; it's obvious and dramatic, and, after all, you were there when Arthur Rackell swallowed poison and died. But beyond the obvious, why you? Have the police been candid?"

"That's a damn silly question," Heath declared. He had a flat but aggressive baritone. "The police are never candid."

"I knew a candid cop once," Fifi Goheen said helpfully.

"It seems to me," Carol Berk told Wolfe, "that you're being dramatic too, getting us down

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here. It would have taken a sleight-of-hand artist to get the pillbox from his pocket and switch a capsule and put it back, without being seen. And while the box was on the table it was right under our eyes."

Wolfe grunted. "You were all staring at it? For twelve minutes straight?"

"She didn't say we were staring at it," Leddegard blurted offensively.

"Pfui." Wolfe was disgusted. "A lummox could have managed it. Reaching for something—a roll, a glass—dropping the hand onto the box, checking glances while withdrawing the hand, changing capsules beneath the table, returning the box with another casual unnoticeable gesture. I would undertake it myself with thin inducement, and I'm not Houdini."

"Tell me something," Leddegard demanded. "I may be thick, but why did it have to be done at the restaurant? Why not before?"

Wolfe nodded. "That's not excluded, certainly. You five people were not the only ones intimate enough with Arthur Rackell to know about his pink vitamin capsules and that he took three a day, one before each meal. Nor did you have a monopoly of opportunity. However—" His glance went left. "Mrs. Rackell, will you repeat what you told me this afternoon? About Saturday evening?"

She had been keeping her eyes at Wolfe but now moved her head to take the others in. Judging from her expression as she went down the line, apparently she was convinced not that one of them was a Commie and a murderer, but that they *all* were—excluding her husband, of course.

She returned to Wolfe. "My husband and Arthur had spent the afternoon getting an important shipment released and got home a little before six. They went to their rooms to take a shower and change. While Arthur was in the shower my cook and housekeeper, Mrs. Kremp, went to his room to get things out for him, shirt and socks and underwear—she's like that; she's been doing it for years. The articles he had taken from his pockets were on the bureau, and she looked in the pillbox and saw it was empty, and she got three capsules from the bottle in a drawer—it held a hundred and was half-full—and put them in the box. She did that too, every day. She is a competent woman, but she's extremely sentimental."

"And she had no reason," Wolfe inquired, "for wishing your nephew dead?"

"Certainly not!"

"She has of course told the police?"

"Of course."

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"Was there anyone in the apartment other than you four—you, your husband, your nephew, and Mrs. Kremp?"

"No. No one. The maid was away. My husband and I were going to the country for the week end."

"After Mrs. Kremp put the capsules in the box, and before your nephew came from the shower to dress, did you enter your nephew's room during that period?"

"No. I didn't enter it at all."

"Did you, Mr. Rackell?"

"I did not." He sounded as mournful as he looked.

Wolfe's eyes went left to right, from Carol Berk at one end to Leddegard at the other. "Then we have Arthur Rackell bathed and dressed, the pillbox in his pocket. The police are not confiding in me, but I read newspapers. Leaving the apartment he went down in the elevator and out to the sidewalk where the doorman got a taxi for him. He was alone in the taxi and it took him straight to the restaurant. The capsules left in the bottle have been examined and had not been tampered with. There we are. Are you prepared to impeach Mrs. Kremp, or Mr. or Mrs. Rackell? Can you support the assumption that one of them murdered Arthur Rackell?"

"It's not inconceivable," Della Devlin murmured.

"No," Wolfe conceded. "Nor is it inconceivable that he chose that moment and method to kill himself, nor even that a capsule of poison got into the bottle by accident. But I exclude them as too improbable for consideration, and so will everyone else, including the police. The inquiring mind is rarely blessed with a certainty; it must make shift with assumptions; and I am assuming, on the evidence, that when Arthur arrived at the restaurant the capsules in the box in his pocket were innocent. I invite you to challenge it. If you can't the substitution was made at the restaurant, and you see how you stand. The police are after you and so am I. One of you? Or all of you? I intend to find out."

"You're scaring me stiff," Fifi Goheen said. "I'm frail and I may collapse." She stood up. "Come on Leddy, I'll buy you a drink."

Leddegard reached for her elbow and gave it a little shake. "Hold it, Fee," he told her gruffly. "This guy has been known to do flips. Let's see. Sit down."

"Blah. You are scared. You've got a reputation." She jerked her arm loose and took two quick steps to the edge of Wolfe's desk. Her voice rose a little. "I don't like the atmosphere here. You're too fat to look at. Orchids, for God's sake!" Her hand darted to the bowl of Miltonias and with a flip of the wrist she sent it

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skidding along the slick surface and off to the floor.

There was some commotion. Mrs. Rackell jerked her feet back, away from the tumbling bowl. Carol Berk said something. Ledegard left his chair and started for Fifi, but she whirled away to Henry Jameson Heath, pressed her palms to his cheeks, and bent to him. She implored him, "Hank, I love you! Do you love me? Take me somewhere and buy me a drink."

Della Devlin sprang up, hauled off, and smacked Fifi on the side of the head. It was not merely a tap, and Fifi, off balance, nearly toppled. Heath came upright and was between them. Della stood, glaring and panting. They held the tableau long enough for a take, then Fifi broke it up by addressing Della past Heath's shoulder.

"That won't help any, Del. Can he help it when he's with you if he wishes it was me? Can I help it? This only makes it worse. If he'll buy a new suit and quit bailing out Commies and stay out of jail, I may make him happy." She touched Heath's cheeks with her fingertips. "Say when, Hank." She swerved around him to the desk and told Wolfe, "Look, you buy me a drink."

I was there, retrieving the bowl. The water wouldn't hurt the rug. Taking her arm firmly, I escorted her across to the table by the big globe, which Fritz and I had outfitted, and told her to name it. She said Scotch on the rocks, and I made it ample. The others, invited, stated their preferences, and Carol Berk came to help me. Rackell, who had been between Della and Fifi, decided to move and went to Carol's chair, so when we had finished serving she took his.

Throughout the interlude two had neither moved nor spoken—Mrs. Rackell and Wolfe. Now Wolfe sent his eyes from left to right and back again.

"I trust," he said sourly, "that Miss Goheen has completed her impromptu performance. I was trying to make it clear that you five people are in a fix. I'm not going to pester you about your positions and movements at the restaurant that evening, what you saw or didn't see; if there was anything in that to point or eliminate, the police would have already acted on it and I'm too far behind. I might spend a few hours digging at you, trying to find a reason why one or more of you wanted Arthur Rackell dead, but the police have had four days on that too, and I doubt if I could catch up. Since you were good enough to come here at Mrs. Rackell's request I suppose you would be willing to answer some questions, but there doesn't seem to be any worth asking. Have you people been

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together at any time since Saturday evening?"

Glances were exchanged. Leddegard inquired, "Do you mean all five of us?"

"Yes."

"No, we haven't."

"Then I should think you would want to talk. Go ahead. I'll drink some beer and eavesdrop. Of course at least one of you will be on guard, but the others can speak freely. You might say something useful."

Carol Berk, now nearer me, let out a little snort. Fritz had brought a tray, and Wolfe opened a bottle, poured, waited for the foam to reach the right level, and drank. Nobody said a word.

Leddegard spoke. "It doesn't seem to work. Did you expect it to?"

"We ought to make it work," Fifi declared. "I think he's damn considerate even if he is fat, and we should help." Her head turned. "Carol, let's talk."

"Glad to," Carol agreed. "You start. Shoot."

"Well, how's this? We all knew Arthur was practically a commissar, I always called him comrade, and we knew his aunt and uncle hated it, and he was afraid he might lose his job and have to go on relief but he was so damn brave and honest he couldn't keep his mouth shut. We all knew that?"

"Of course."

"Did you know this too? He told me—a week ago today, I think it was. His aunt put it to him, reform or out on the street, and he told her he was secretly working for the FBI, spying on the Commies, but he wasn't. He thought the FBI was practically the Gestapo. I told him he shouldn't—"

"That's a lie!"

Mrs. Rackell didn't shout but she put lots of feeling in it. All eyes went to her. Her husband got up and put a hand on her shoulder. There were murmurs.

"That's an infamous lie," she said. "My nephew was a patriotic American. More than you are, all of you. All of you!" She left her chair. "I've had enough of this. I shouldn't have come. Come, Ben, we're going."

She marched out. Rackell muttered to Wolfe, "A shock for her—a real shock—I'll phone you—" and trotted after her. I went to the hall to let them out, but she had already opened the door and was on the stoop, and Rackell followed. I shut the door and went back to the office.

They were buzzing. Fifi had started them talking, all right. Wolfe was refilling his glass, watching the foam rise. I crossed to Fifi and took her glass and went to the table to replenish it, thinking she had earned a little service. She was the center of the buzzing, supplying the details of

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her revelation. She was sure Arthur had not been stringing her; he had told her in strict confidence, at a place and time she declined to specify, that he had told his aunt a barefaced lie—that he was working for the FBI and it must not be known. No, she hadn't told the police. She didn't like the police, especially a Lieutenant Rowcliff, who had questioned her three times and was a lout.

I looked and listened and tried to decide if Fifi was putting on an act. She was hard to tag. Was one of the others covering, and if so which one? I reached no conclusion and had no hunch. They were all interested and inquisitive, even Della Devlin, though she didn't address Fifi directly.

The only one who knew I was there was Carol Berk, who sent me a slanting glance and saw me catch it. I raised a brow at her. "What is it, a pitchout?"

"You name it." She smiled, the way she might smile at a panhandler, humane but superior. "Why, who's on base?"

I decided it right then that she was worth looking at, if for nothing else, to find out what she was keeping back. "They're loaded," I told her. "Five of you. It's against the rules. The umpire won't allow it. Mr. Wolfe is the umpire."

"He looks to me more like the backstop," she said indifferently.

I saw that it might be necessary, if events permitted, to find an opportunity to spend enough time with her to make it clear that I didn't like her.

All of a sudden Fifi Goheen let fly again. Returning from the bar with her second refill she brought the bottle of Scotch along and poured a good three fingers in Wolfe's beer glass. She put the bottle on his desk, leaned over to stretch an arm and pat him on top of the head, straightened up, and grinned at him.

"Get high," she said urgently.

He glared at her.

"Do a flip," she commanded.

He glared.

"It's a damn shame," she declared. "The cops aren't speaking to you, and here you're buying the drinks and we're not even sociable. Why shouldn't we tell you what the cops have already found out? If they're any good they have. Take Miss Devlin here." She waved a hand. "Dozens of people will tell you that she would have got Hank Heath to make it legal long ago if Arthur hadn't told him something about her, God knows what. Any woman would kill a man for that. And—"

"Shut up, Fee!" Leddegard barked at her.

"Let her rave," Della Devlin said, white-faced.

Fifi ignored them. "And Mr.

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Leddegard, who is a dear friend of mine, with him it's a question of his wife—don't be a fool, Leddy. Everybody knows it." Back to Wolfe. "She went to South America with Arthur a couple of years ago and caught a disease and died there. I have no idea why Mr. Leddegard waited so long to kill him."

She drained her glass and put it on the desk. "This Arthur Rackell," she said, "was quite a guy, of his kind. Carol Berk and I discovered only a month ago that he was driving double, by a little mischance I'd rather not describe. It was quite embarrasing. I don't know how she felt about it, you can ask her, but I know about me. All I needed was the poison, and all you need is to find out how I got it. I understand that potassium cyanide is used for a lot of things and is easy to get if you really want it. Then there's Hank Heath. He thought Arthur had me taped, which was true in a way, but would a man kill another man just to get a woman, even one as pure and beautiful as me? You can ask him. No, I'll ask him."

She wheeled. "Would y o u, Hank?" She wheeled again to Wolfe. "As you see, that was quite a dinner party Arthur got up, but he doesn't deserve all the credit. I dared him to. I wanted a good audience, one that would appreciate—hey, that hurts!"

Heath was beside her, gripping her arm. She jerked away and bumped into Della Devlin, also out of her chair. Carol Berk said something, and so did Leddegard. Heath spoke to Wolfe. "This is a joke, and it's not funny."

Wolfe's brows went up. "It's not my joke, sir."

"You asked us to come here." His voice was soft but very sour, and his glassy eyes looked about ready to pop out of his round pudgy face. "Miss Goheen has been making a fool of you, and there—"

"I have not!" Fifi was back, at his elbow. "I wouldn't dream of it," she told Wolfe. "You know, there's something about you, fat as you are." She reached to pick up the glass of beer and Scotch. "Open your mouth and I'll—hey! Where you going?"

She got no reply. Out of his chair and headed for the door, Wolfe kept on, turning left in the hall, toward the kitchen.

That ended the party. They made remarks, especially Leddegard and Heath, and I was sympathetic as I wrangled them into the hall and on to the front. I went out and stood on the stoop as they descended to the sidewalk and headed for Tenth Avenue, just to see, but by the time they had gone fifty paces, no furtive figures had sneaked out of areaways along the line, so I thought what the hell and went back in.

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A glance in the office showed me it was empty, and I went on to the kitchen.

Fritz was pouring something thick into a big stone jar. Wolfe stood watching him, a slice of sturgeon in one hand and a glass of beer in the other.

I attacked head on. "I admit," I said, "that she was set to toss it at you, but I was there to help wipe it off. What good does it do to duck? There are at least eighty-six things you have to know before you can even start, and you had them there and didn't even try. My vacation starts next Monday. And what about your rule on not eating at bedtime?"

He swallowed. He drank beer, put the glass and the sturgeon on the table, reached to a shelf for a Bursatto melon, got a knife from the rack, cut the melon open, and began spooning the seeds onto a plate.

"The precise moment," he said. "Do you want some?"

"Certainly not," I said coldly. The peach-colored meat was so juicy there was a little pool in each half, and a breeze from the open window carried the smell to me. I reached for one of the halves, got a spoon, scooped out a bite—and another.

Wolfe never talks business during meals, but this was not a meal. In the middle of his melon he remarked, "For us the past is impossible."

I darted my tongue to catch a drop of juice. "Oh. It is?"

"Yes. It would take an army. The police and the FBI have already had four days for it. The source of the poison. Mrs. Kremp. Mrs. Rackell's surmise of the motive. Mr. Heath is presumably a Communist, but what about the others? Anyone might be a Communist, just as anyone might have a hidden disease."

He scooped a bite of melon and dealt with it. "What of the motives suggested by that fantastic female buffoon? Are any of them authentic, and if so which one or ones? That alone would need a regiment. As for the police and the FBI, we have nothing to bargain with. Are they all Communists? Were they all in on it? Must we expose not one murderer but five? All those questions and others would have to be answered. How long would it take?"

"A year ought to do it."

"I doubt it. The past is hopeless. There's too much of it."

I raised my shoulders and let them drop. "Okay, you don't have to rub it in. So we cross it off. Do I draw a check to Rackell for his three grand tonight or wait till morning?"

"Have I asked you to draw a check?"

"No, sir."

He picked up the slice of sturgeon and took a bite. He never skimped on his chewing and it

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took him a good four minutes to finish. Meanwhile I disposed of my melon.

"Archie," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"How does Mr. Heath feel about Miss Goheen?"

"Well," I considered. "There are different ways of putting it. I would say something like you would feel about a dish of stewed terrapin with sherry—within your sight and smell—if you thought you knew how it would taste but had never had any."

He grunted. "Don't be fanciful. It's a serious question in a field where you are qualified as an expert and I'm not. Is his appetite deeply aroused? Would he take a risk for her?"

"I don't know how he is on risks, but I saw how he looked at her and how he reacted when she touched him. Also I saw Della Devlin, and so did you. I would say he would try crossing a high shaky bridge with a wind blowing, but not unless it had rails."

"That was the impression I got. We'll have to try it."

"Try what?"

"A shove. A dig in their ribs. If their past is too much for us, their future isn't, or shouldn't be. We'll have to try it. If it doesn't work we'll try again." He was scowling. "The best I can give it is one chance in twenty. Confound it, it requires the cooperation of Mrs. Rackell, so I'll have to see her again; that can't be helped."

He scooped a bite of melon. "You'll need some instructions. I'll finish this, and we'll go to the office."

He put the bite where it belonged and concentrated on his taste buds.

It didn't work out as scheduled. The program called for getting Mrs. Rackell to the office at eleven o'clock the next morning, Thursday, but when I phoned a little before nine the maid said it was too early to disturb her. At ten she hadn't called back, and I tried again and got her. I explained that Wolfe had an important confidential question to put to her, and she said she would be at the office not later than eleven-thirty. Shortly before eleven she phoned to say that she had called her husband at his office, and it had been decided if the question was important and confidential they should both be present to consider it. Her husband would be free for an hour or so after lunch but had a four-o'clock appointment he would have to keep. We finally settled for six o'clock, and I called Rackell at his office and confirmed it.

Henry Jameson Heath was on the front page of the *Gazette* again that morning, not in connection with homicide. Once more

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he had refused to disclose the names of contributors to the fund for bail for the indicted Communists and apparently he was going to stick to it no matter how much contempt he rolled up. The day's installment on the Rackell murder was on page seven, and there wasn't enough meat in it to feed a cricket. As for me, after an hour at the phone, locating Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin and Orrie Cather and passing them the word, I might as well have gone to the ball game. Wolfe had given me plenty of instructions, but I couldn't act until and unless the clients agreed.

Mrs. Rackell arrived first, at six on the dot. A minute later Wolfe came down from the plant rooms and she started in on him. She had the idea that he was responsible fo Fifi Goheen's slanderous lie about her dead nephew, since it had been uttered in his office, and what did he propose to do about it? Why didn't he have her arrested? Wolfe controlled himself fairly well, but his tone was beginning to get sharp when the doorbell rang and I beat it to the front to let Rackell in. He jogged past me to the office on his short legs, nodded at Wolfe, kissed his wife on the cheek, dropped onto a chair, wiped his long narrow face with a handkerchief, and asked wearily, "What is it? Did you get anywhere with them?"

"No." Wolfe was short. "Not to any conclusion."

"What's this important question?"

"It's blunt and simple. I need to know whether you want the truth enough to pay for it, and if so how much."

Rackell looked at his wife. "What's he talking about?"

"We haven't discussed it," Wolfe told him. "We've been considering a point your wife raised, which I regard as frivolous. This question of mine—perhaps I should call it a suggestion. I have one to offer."

"What?"

"First I'll give you the basis for it." Wolfe leaned back and half closed his eyes. "You heard me tell those five people yesterday why it is assumed that one of them substituted the capsules. On that assumption, after further talk with them, I stack another: that it is highly improbable that the substitution could have been made, under the circumstances as established, entirely unobserved. It would have required a coincidence of remarkable dexterity and uncommon luck, and I will not accept such a coincidence except on weighty evidence. So, assuming that the substitution was made in the restaurant, I also assume, for a test at least, that one of the others saw it and knows who did it. In short, that there was an eyewitness to the murder."

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Rackell's mournful face did not light up with interest. His lips were puckered, making the droop at the corners more pronounced. "That may be," he conceded, "but what if he won't talk?"

"I propose to make him talk."

"How?"

Wolfe rubbed his chin with a thumb and forefinger. His eyes moved to Mrs. Rackell and back to the husband. "This sort of thing," he said, "requires delicacy, discretion, and reticence. I'll put it this way. I will not conspire to get a man punished for a crime he did not commit. It is true that all five of those people may be Communists, but that does not justify framing one of them for murder. My purpose is clear and innocent—to expose the real murderer and bring him to account; and I suggest a devious method only because no other seems likely to succeed. Evidently the police, after five days on it, are up in a tree, and so is the FBI—if it is engaged, and you think it is. I want to earn my fee."

Rackell was frowning. "I still don't exactly know what you're suggesting."

"I know it; I've been long-winded. I didn't want you to misunderstand." Wolfe came forward in his chair and put his palms on the desk. "The eyewitness is obviously reluctant. I suggest that you consent to provide twenty thousand dollars, to be paid only if my method succeeds. That will cover my fee for the unusual service I will render and also any extraordinary expense I may incur. Two things must be understood: you approve the expenditure in your interest, and the express purpose is to catch the guilty person." He upturned his palms. "There it is."

"My God. Twenty thousand." Rackell shook his head. "That's a lot of money. You mean you want a check for that amount now?"

"No. To be paid if and when earned. An oral commitment will do. Mr. Goodwin hears us and has a good memory."

Rackell opened his mouth and closed it again. He looked at his wife. He looked back at Wolfe. "Look here," he said earnestly, "maybe I'm thickheaded. It sounds to me as if what this amounts to is bribing a witness. With my money."

"Don't be a fool, Ben," his wife said sharply.

"I think you misunderstand," Wolfe told him. "To bribe is to influence corruptly by some consideration. Anyone who receives any of your money through me will get it only as an inducement to tell the truth. Influence, yes. Corrupt, surely not. As for the amount, I don't wonder that you hesitate. It's quite a sum, but I wouldn't undertake it for less."

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Rackell looked at his wife again. "What did you mean, Pauline, don't be a fool?"

"I meant you'd be a fool not to do it, of course." She felt so strongly about it that her lips moved. "It was you who wanted to come to Mr. Wolfe in the first place, and now when he really wants to do something you talk about bribing. If it's the money I have plenty of my own and I'll pay—" She stopped abruptly, tightening her lips. "I'll pay half," she said. "That's fair enough; we'll each pay half." She went to Wolfe. "Who is it, that Goheen woman?"

Wolfe ignored her. He asked Rackell, "Well, sir?"

Rackell didn't like it. He avoided his wife's gaze, but he knew it was on him, and it was pressing. He even looked at me, as if my eye might somehow help, but I was deadpan. Then he returned to Wolfe.

"All right," he said.

"You accept my proposal?"

"Yes. Only I'll pay it. I'd rather not—I'd rather pay it myself. You said to be paid if and when earned. Who decides whether you've earned it or not?"

"You do. I doubt if that will be a bone to pick."

"A question my wife asked—do you know who the eyewitness is?"

"Your wife was witless to ask it. If I knew would I tell you? Or would you want me to? Now?"

Rackell shook his head. "No, I guess not. No, I can see that it's better just to let you—" He left it hanging. "Is there anything else you want to say about it?"

Wolfe said there wasn't. Rackell got up and stood there as if he would like to say something but didn't know what. I arose and moved toward the door. I didn't want to be rude to a client who had just bought a suggestion that would cost him twenty grand, but now that he had okayed it I had a job to do and I wanted to get going. I still didn't know where Wolfe thought he was headed for, but the sooner I got started on my instructions the sooner I would know. They finally came, and I went ahead and opened the front door for them. She held his elbow going down the stoop. I shut the door and rejoined Wolfe in the office.

"Well?" I demanded. "Do I proceed?"

"Yes."

"It's nearly half-past six. If I offer to buy her a meal—I doubt if that's the right approach."

"You know the approaches to women, I don't."

"Yeah." I sat at my desk and pulled the phone to me. "If you ask me this stunt you've hatched is a swell approach to a trip to the hoosegow. For both of us."

He grunted. I started dialing a number.

(Continued on page 95)

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a NEW crime story by

ANTHONY GILBERT

Here is the strangest—no, the weirdest—Christmas story you've ever read. It is also the oddest kind of crime story to come from the typewriter of Anthony Gilbert . . .

THE FUNERAL OF DENDY WATT

by ANTHONY GILBERT

DENDY WATT, AN OLD REPROBATE, was found hanging in a disused shed three days before Christmas, leaving neither note, relatives, nor money to tidy up his earthly affairs. After the inquest the body was passed to the Matthews Funeral Parlor for disposal. Mortimer Matthews was a busy little man who buried paupers at a cut rate in return for recommendations from the Councillors when more profitable interments were in question. That was the year of the big snow, and Death was as busy as the proverbial bee. Some ministers were conducting funerals in triplicate, and burying in triplicate, too, where there was no one to accept responsibility for the deceased.

On Christmas Eve old Mort Matthews had his hands full with the funeral of the Honorable Mrs. Grubb, who was going to meet her maker in the full panoply of embroidered pall, silk-hatted attendants, a special anthem, and a diatribe from the Reverend Cartwright. It wasn't feasible to keep Dendy Watt in cold storage till after the holiday—Christmas was always good for the trade, with old gentlemen over-indulging and old ladies falling off ladders trying to hang the unwanted mistletoe. "We'll have coffins queuing up at the gate," Mort told his driver, Tig Wilson. "Mr. Cartwright can't fit in another service before Christmas, so I've arranged with the Reverend Graves at Ullerton—good name that for a minister, don't you agree?—to include Dendy with two old gents from the local almshouses who went out

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together, got in the way of a car—shocking thing really." (The coroner had brought in a benign verdict that permitted Dendy Watt to be buried in consecrated ground.)

"And in death they were not divided," quoted Tig, and Mr. Matthews smiled his approval.

"A very philosophic spirit, Mr. Wilson. The funeral's fixed for 2:30 the day of Christmas Eve, but Mr. Graves says he'd postpone it for fifteen minutes, but no longer."

Tig Wilson frowned. "It can't be done, Mr. Matthews. There's the Honorable Mrs. Grubb at 12:00—that'll take an hour, coming and going; then there's my lunch, and you did agree I should get off after that. My boy's expecting me—I always go there Christmas Eve to help decorate the place—I told him I'd be there at four o'clock. Dendy can't expect to upset *everybody's* plans."

"Mr. Wilson!" Mort sounded shocked. "Where's your respect for the dead? Putting your personal convenience in the foreground? You know our motto—'Death works all round the clock and so do we.' Anyway, Ullerton's not so far out of your way and you can finish the journey in the van."

The van was the plain hearse—the posh one was reserved for Mrs. Grubb and such; poor chaps like Dendy Watt wouldn't appreciate elegant fittings and silver rails. The van looked so like an ordinary plain truck—no name on it, of course, you can't advertise trading in corpses; so most people thought that was what it looked like—an ordinary truck.

"It's a nuisance," Mort was continuing smoothly. "Such short notice. He was a little man, was Dendy, and right now I don't have a coffin his size. That means using one of the larger ones—always keep a few in stock for precisely this sort of emergency—a great waste of good wood, I call it." He shook his head. "And no one to appreciate it. I don't like waste, Mr. Wilson, but we mustn't grudge a fellow creature the last service we can afford him."

Tig raced back from the Grubb interment, unnecessarily prolonged, in his opinion, by an obsequious rector. He stopped at a local café for a cup of coffee and a sandwich and was agreeably surprised on his return to the funeral parlor to find that Mr. Matthews, perhaps experiencing a qualm of conscience over stealing his driver's Christmas Eve, had everything prepared for him. The plain van stood by the side entrance, as usual; the coffin had the handsomest bed Dendy had occupied for years, with just his name and a date on the lid.

Mr. Wilson looked round for a pall to cover the ceremonial

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box, but Mort said easily, "You won't need that, Mr. Wilson. One thing this hearse does provide is complete privacy, and Mr. Graves is sure to have a spare pall. We wouldn't want any harm to come to this one—children, you know."

"My grandsons won't be playing with a hearse," said Tig stiffly. "No attendants, sir?" For the two mutes who had presumably helped to hoist the coffin into the van were putting on their coats and saying, "Happy Christmas."

"There will be attendants for Dendy's companions," smiled Mort. "At this festive season they will hardly grudge him a share of their—accoutrements. Be sure to remember me to your son. I wonder if you realize your good fortune, Mr. Wilson—a son and one so devoted to his father. Not all of us are so blessed."

Mr. Wilson felt embarrassed. Everyone knew that Mort's only surviving relative was a nephew, first cousin in roguery to the dead Mr. Watt, and at this very moment, if rumor could be believed, the police were interested in his whereabouts. It was good of the old man, really, to go on bothering about his nephew; it was difficult to see what Mort got out of it.

It appeared to Tig that all the world and his wife had chosen that afternoon to start the Christmas holiday. The sky, that had been lowering when he started, soon sank like a huge dingy cloth loaded with old washing. He'd reached Faiths Cross when the snow began again. If progress had been decorous even by funeral standards up to this point, it now dwindled to a virtual standstill. Innumerable learner-drivers seemed to be abroad, all struggling for the middle of the road and refusing to be budged, presumably because they feared to be crushed against the sidewalk.

Tig looked ever and anon at his watch: Mr. Matthews had failed to explain what he was to do with his burden if he didn't reach the churchyard in time. He doubted if the minister would allow him to park the coffin in an outbuilding, and he certainly didn't propose to take Dendy to his son's house as an uninvited guest. There were limits even to Christmas hospitality.

When it became obvious he wasn't going to reach his objective anywhere near the right time Tig decided on what his employer later described as "a madman's decision." Struggling out of the muddle of trailing cars he turned the hearse into a side road and started to careen at a most unseemly pace over the Downs. He knew this part of the country—he was a birdwatcher in his spare time—and there were landmarks that would warn him

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when he should rejoin the maid road. What he hadn't allowed for was the obvious fact that Downs have a disconcerting way of looking alike when snow-covered, and landmarks simply go to ground like homing moles. Still, Tig blundered on until suddenly he felt a sickening lurch, nearly fell out of his seat, and realized that the wheels of the van had plunged into a ditch.

"Hup there!" he said impatiently, gunning the engine. But all that happened was that the wheels, after a whirl or two, stopped dead. Tig hopped out to investigate. He was shocked to find the hearse canted at a most unreasonable angle. The snow was considerably thicker than he'd appreciated and they were stuck as tight as a fly in a spider's web. Moreover, a furious wind had sprung up, threatening to turn him into a snowman if he didn't get under shelter soon. Thoughtfully he unbolted the back door of the hearse and climbed in, dragging his driver's rug with him.

"You won't object to a bit of company, I daresay," he observed peaceably, hauling out a pack of cigarettes. Mr. Matthews didn't permit his drivers to smoke on duty—disrespect to the dead, he called it. Besides, future corpses might notice and leave instructions for their future interment with a rival firm.

"You can't let up for a moment when you're in business, Mr. Wilson," Mort always said.

Still, the circumstances were unusual and Dendy was unlikely to object to a whiff of the weed. More likely to put his head out of the coffin and demand his share, decided Tig Wilson. He stopped thinking about Dendy and concentrated on his own dilemma. First, there was no chance of his reaching Ullerton in time for his charge to make a third in the churchyard. The only landmark he'd been able to distinguish was a faint giant finger against the snow-filled sky, that he identified as the spire of St. Anselms, the Parbury Parish Church. If he was right that meant he had twenty miles to go and approximately thirty minutes in which to achieve them—a not impossible task on good country roads in normal weather, but isolated in a snowfield, with the hearse stationary and with no likelihood of rescue, it looked rather as though he and Dendy were going to spend Christmas together.

Suddenly Tig felt enormously sorry for himself. "Have to make trouble even from the grave, don't you?" he demanded of the corpse. He got up and looked out of the door. Now he was sure it was Parbury in the distance, a very go-ahead place, warming up for Christmas since the beginning of the month. You saw the ads everywhere.

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Come to the Grand Hotel, Parbury, for the best Christmas you ever had, including a visit to the famous Milton Circus. Lions-Seals-Elephants.

Mr. Wilson didn't approve. Animals should be considered the same as humans, and who likes being made to look silly?

He came back and seated himself on the coffin. There was really nowhere else to sit. A minute later he was aware of a knocking and he sprang up hopefully, anticipating some other lost soul marooned in the snow. He'd even have welcomed the kind of person Dendy Watt had been in life. But there was no one outside, no one in sight. Me imagining things, Tig decided, closing the door against the bitter wind.

The knocking continued.

Suddenly Tig's heart fell into his boots, because now he realized that the knocking came from inside the hearse, and, knowing its scanty furnishings there was only one place from which it could emanate.

Mr. Wilson had never believed in ghosts—people did a hard enough stint in life, let 'em rest afterwards. So it didn't occur to him that it might be Dendy's ghost come to keep him company. Similarly, he knew it couldn't be Dendy in the flesh, not the way he'd been when they found him and a Cornoner's Jury sitting on him after that.

So there remained only one explanation. Mr. Matthews, that model of propriety and self-protection, had for once in his life confused two coffins. Dendy must have been buried in St. Peters Churchyard with all the panoply of wealth and respectful patronage, and the occupant of *this* coffin—at that instant the frozen snow was no colder than the blood freezing in Mr. Wilson's veins. Because it so happened there'd been only one other funeral from the Matthews Parlor that morning, that of the Honorable (and ineffably haughty) Mrs. Grubb.

"Coming, madam," said Mr. Wilson humbly, falling off the coffin as if it had been a hot seat and going to look for the chisel he always carried in a corner of the hearse. All his life this had been his private dread—that one day they would seal up a cataleptic; and should such a thing happen when he was in charge he liked to know he could find a quick way out—for himself as well as the corpse.

The knocking increased in vigor. Still whispering incoherencies Tig dropped to his knees. The coffin must have been fastened in a devil of a hurry, screws just jammed in any way and not even tightened. Mr. Wilson's meticulous soul was shocked.

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Even if it was a pauper's funeral and there wasn't much profit to be made out of it, these affairs should be done decently and properly. Still, it helped him now. He had removed most of the screws when a thick unrecognizable voice inquired, "Blast you, why are you taking so long? Do you want me to suffocate?"—which caused the little man to think he'd prefer the company of a vampire bat to this old battle-ax in her eternal nightie.

"Very sorry, madam," he mouthed and heaved up the lid. And almost dropped it again. Because it wasn't the Honorable Mrs. Grubb at all, but a man he'd never seen before in his life, a big redhead, with a wicked brown eye and hands big enough to choke a little chap who chanced to put a foot wrong. The corpse put out an immense arm and knocked the coffin lid to one side.

"You deaf or something?" he demanded.

Mr. Wilson, his brain numbed by the snow, the vigil, and sheer terror, could find nothing better to say than "What are you doing in that box?"

"Getting out," retorted the other. "Here, give me a hand." He caught Mr. Wilson by the shoulder, almost compressing him up like a concertina. "You've got no consideration," he went on accusingly. "It's bad enough being boxed up without some idiot parking himself over my air holes."

Startled, Tig looked down at the lid and there, right enough, was a row of small holes clearly designed to enable the occupant to breathe. Oh, no wonder Mr. Matthews had put the coffin into the van before he let his driver see it! If the mutes hadn't been in such an all-fired hurry they would have noticed something odd.

"I don't understand," Tig stammered. "Mr. Matthews—"

And then suddenly the penny dropped. "I know who you are—you're Mr. Matthews' nephew." And that seemed to complete the horror. If it had been bad to be penned up with Dendy Watt, deceased, it was Paradise compared with finding yourself in a cramped space with a murderer—because that's how the police had been describing him.

And even through the horror Tig knew a pang of admiration at the mind that had conjured up such a plot. The police might be on the lookout for the fugitive, but even they wouldn't think to open every coffin that left the Parlor. Particularly as Mr. Matthews had never made any secret of the fact that he had no use at all for his sole surviving relative.

"Why did he do it?" Tig asked, having one of those simple minds that can only consider one prob-

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lem at a time. "Your uncle, I mean." Because it stood to reason that Mort had been in the plot.

"Ever hear of the Achilles' heel?" demanded Stanley Matthews. "Here, give me one of those cigarettes. You're a hell of a good host, I must say. Well, most people have them and Uncle Mort's no exception. There are one or two activities of his he wouldn't want the police to know about."

"Blackmail!" stammered Mr. Wilson.

"That's a harsh word. I prefer to call it mutual assistance."

"But, look here," protested Mr. Wilson, "how did you think it was going to work? You couldn't guess I should come over the Downs."

"And why the hell did you?" growled Stanley.

"No need to adopt that tone," exclaimed Tig, plucking up courage. "It's lucky for you I did. If I'd kept my appointment on time"—he glanced at the watch on his wrist, a nice one, Billy's Christmas present last year—"you'd be in the churchyard by now."

"Not me, little man," said Stanley soothingly. "Not me."

Tig shook a reproving head. "It doesn't work, Mr. Matthews. I know about the films where a coffin's filled with rocks, but that's strictly for the birds. The bearers always know if there isn't a body on board. Don't ask me how. Instinct maybe."

"You've got me wrong," Stanley told him in gentle tones. "There would have been a body in the coffin, of course."

The penny hadn't only dropped by now, it was rolling about like a mad thing. Stanley's meaning was unmistakable. There would be a body in the coffin and it wouldn't be Dendy Watt's. It would be Tig's.

"But that's murder," Tig stammered.

"You do believe in calling a spade a spade, don't you, Mr. Wilson? I prefer to call it expediency. As for coming over the Downs, if it's any consolation to you you've made a howling mess of my plans."

"What were they?" Tig inquired. Not that he cared, but anything that delayed the moment when he'd be lying in the box was all to the good.

"Christmas is the season of good will," Stanley explained. "Say you were bowling along and some chap hailed you, said there'd been a fearful accident, no telephone, must get a doctor, how about a lift—"

"Mr. Matthews doesn't allow his drivers to give lifts."

"Not even on Christmas Eve?"

"And there'd be other cars."

"Not where my friends 'ud be waiting for you. In any case, there's something called moral

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suasion." He had shrugged himself out of an enormous shroud and revealed a suit of loud tweeds and suede shoes to match. He patted his pocket impressively. "Ever felt the nose of a gun in your ribs, Mr. Wilson? That's what I call moral suasion. Well, in those circumstances, if a chap says, 'Turn right,' you'd turn."

"I wouldn't, you know," said Mr. Wilson.

"A man of principle," gibed Stanley. "That's what my uncle said. You'll be safe with Mr. Wilson, he said, you can always rely on him."

"Won't your friends be annoyed when you don't keep the appointment?" Mr. Wilson asked.

"Too right they will. Lucky for you, really, you won't be able to hear them."

"You're going to have your work cut out explaining to my boy, Billy, what's happened to me," Tig warned him. "He was expecting me at four o'clock. He doesn't know about this extra job, so when I don't show up he'll start getting anxious."

"And he'll ring the old man and find out you took a diversion by way of Ullerton, and are on your way."

"He'll know that if I was going to be much later than promised I'd ring him and explain."

"Then maybe the lines will be down, with all this snow."

"You don't know Billy," said Mr. Wilson simply. "He'll come out looking for me himself. When he finds no trace of the van on the road he'll recall that I know the Downs better than many people know their own streets, and even in a snowstorm he won't overlook something as big as a hearse."

"So he finds the h e a r s e?" Stanley still sounded untroubled. "He'll take a peek inside and there'll be the locked box with Dendy Watt's name on it—it won't bother you to be buried under the wrong moniker, will it? It's not as though it makes any difference in the long run. And he'll t h i n k — e v e r y o n e will think—the driver k n e w he couldn't shift it unaided, so he went out to look for help."

Stanley continued, "Stands to reason there won't be any footprints to guide them, and when they don't find anyone they'll remember the big bomb crater left by a dropped egg during the war—some of them go nearly as far down as Australia, I've heard. Too bad, poor Mr. Wilson, such a reliable chap, but it happens to all of us. Uncle Mort will write to your son—a great loss, died in the execution of his duty, and how can man die better; and whatever name's on the coffin you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you're lying in consecrated ground—sods crumbled, words of commendation, t h e

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whole lot. Mind you, I don't say it's not bad luck, but then it's bad luck when a noncombatant in a war gets wiped out."

Stanley pulled a bottle out of his pocket and offered it courteously to his companion. Mr. Wilson shook his head.

"I'm teetotal."

"The best whiskey, too." He took a slug himself to prove his own words. "Come now," he urged, "I don't suppose life with Uncle Mort is such a ball of fire. Probably won't find the grave much different."

"It's my boy I'm thinking of. It won't be the same thing not spending Christmas with him. And the children. I had a new animal imitation to show them," Tig added in regretful tones. "That's my sideline—a private entertainer, I call myself. No credit to me, of course, just a gift. Like this."

A dog barked shrilly, a cat shrieked. Stanley Matthews nearly dropped the whiskey bottle. "Was that you?" he demanded.

"An old lady living next door came in one year and said she was going to report me to the Cruelty to Animals crowd, ill-treating a cat like that."

"I can see you're going to be missed, Mr. Wilson. Too bad. What was that new imitation you were following?"

"Well, a wolf call, a coyote really. I'd been practising for a long time." He threw back his head and a loud bloodcurdling cry filled the air.

"You do that once more and you'll get yourself roughed up before you go into the box," Stanley warned him. "Enough to make your blood run cold."

"You wouldn't believe the trouble I was at," persisted Tig shyly. "One week-end I even went to the London Zoo—you have to do things right for children or they see right through you, you know. It's not very easy to make wolves howl, but I managed it a time or two. Quite a bit of unpleasantness with the keeper, but it was all in a good cause, you know."

"Started a riot, I shouldn't wonder. Now make a noise like a giraffe."

"They don't make any sound," Tig explained. "Dumb, they call them."

"I see you've got the message." Stanley took another pull at his bottle. "No sense hanging about," he observed briskly. "I did hope you might be reasonable. I brought some pills—take them in a swig of whiskey and you'd be out for the count before you could say Jack Robinson. In your own best interests, really."

Mr. Wilson began to pray for a miracle; he knew pretty well where they were. Even apart from holidays and snow you wouldn't expect to encounter any people out here. It was grazing land,

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good for birdwatching in season—he'd hoped he might glimpse a long-tailed Barbary snipe in the spring. There'd been rumors. Angels were all very well in their way, but he had a sneaking preference for the snipe.

Stanley took a gun out of his pocket and waved it purposefully toward the open coffin. "My, you're going to rattle," he observed; "still, there's always the shroud." He stooped to lift it and at that moment a wild roar filled the van. He swung round, pale with fury. "I warned you," he said. "Stop those damn tricks, I told you! It's about time you did go underground."

"But that wasn't me," protested Mr. Wilson. "I can only do domestic animals, except for the coyote, and I had to work for weeks on that."

"Green grow the grasses-oh!" sneered Stanley. "I suppose you'd have me believe there's a real lion out there."

"I don't know what else," murmured Tig. "No, Mr. Matthews, don't open the door. I'd sooner have the pills and whiskey. I never did fancy being mauled about by a lion."

"And you so fond of animals! Well, I always had a fancy to meet a lion." He laughed and opened the back door of the van. "What a joke!"

Only this joke backfired, because there really was a lion there. "Here's your opportunity," murmured Tig courteously, giving him a shove. He slammed the door behind Stanley and bolted it.

Sometime later, when everything seemed quiet again, he gingerly unfastened the door. There was no sign of any lion, and except for what remained of Mr. Matthews, Tig might have wondered if he'd dreamed the whole affair. He hesitated a moment, then picked up the half-empty bottle. He thought the taste nauseating, but at least the spirits gave him the strength and courage to roll the wreckage of Stanley Matthews in the massive shroud and somehow lug it inside the van. Tig was a deft man at his job, accustomed to turning his hand at any bit of work required of him.

He covered the remains, folding the material neatly, replaced the coffin lid, and screwed it down tight. The Recording Angel might have a job getting *that* off, he reflected. The snow that had stopped for a while now started again in a half-hearted sort of way and soon covered the traces of Stanley's encounter with the king of beasts. Tig had no fear of the lion returning. Even wild specimens—and it stood to reason this one couldn't be wild—only attack when they're hungry, and this particular lion had just made a devilish good meal.

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After that he supposed he must have slept for a while—a second tot of whiskey must have accounted for his unusual drowsiness; certainly, when the job was finished, he was surprised to find the bottle empty, so he threw that into the snow—it would never do for an empty whiskey bottle to be found in Mort Matthews' hearse.

Then he thought he must be dreaming when he heard the voices singing a carol, the one they always sang at home on Christmas afternoon. Groggily he moved to the door and saw a string of lights bobbing along by the hedge. It was Billy and some of the neighbors come to look for him, just as his father had predicted.

"Rang Mr. Mathews," Billy explained, "and he told me about this extra duty. Rang Ullerton and learned you'd never got there, so we thought—hearse has broken down, and no wonder."

"How did you get here?" inquired Tig.

"Borrowed a jeep," said Billy airily. "Nothing less would have got us up here. Luckily a chap in a pub remembered seeing Mr. Matthews' hearse making for the Downs. We'd best be going," he added. "Jo will be worrying. Can't do much for him, I'm afraid." He jerked a thumb at the coffin. "Still, no one's going to run away with him and from all accounts he won't be any lonelier here than he was in life."

Mr. Wilson draped the rug over the coffin, pall-wise. "I'll come and get him myself after the holiday," he promised.

"Lucky you didn't run across the lion that escaped from the Milton Circus in Parbury," Billy told him on the way back. "Whole place is ringing with the story. A new acquisition and not quite settled down, by all accounts. Keeper opened the cage to give him his food and the lion bolted. Still, no harm done. He seems to have padded back docilely enough after having a snuff round. Great big world seems to have been too much for him and he went right off to sleep. Didn't even want his grub."

Later that evening, when Mr. Wilson had had *his* grub, and had won golden opinions for his imitations of a coyote—no, he explained, he couldn't do a lion—he rang up Mr. Matthews to explain about the hearse. "Not to worry, sir," he said. "He'll be all right up there. I did notice the screws were a bit loose, but I tightened them all up and covered the box with the rug, sort of respectful, see? He won't give any trouble."

"I'm sure he won't, Mr. Wilson," said Mr. Matthews smoothly. If he was surprised to hear his driver's voice no one would have guessed. "I knew I

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could rely on you not to let me down."

He hung up the receiver. "I guessed he'd notice those screws," he told himself. "A great stickler for the right thing, Mr. Wilson is. The rug, too—a very happy thought. And he'd hardly notice the air holes—hardly notice 'em."

Mortimer Matthews poured himself a glass of cowslip wine. "Goodbye, Stanley," he said. "I always warned you that your slug-a-bed habits would prove your downfall. You have to be up very early—very early indeed—to catch this downy old bird napping."

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To tell the truth, we haven't the least idea how amateur spies—nonprofessional secret-service agents—are recruited. But here's the way it happened to Mr. James, and we assume it could happen in a similar way to you—if you don't watch out. And in this adventure Mr. James was offered an extra inducement—that is, in addition to the prospect of excitement, challenge, and glamor he was promised that positively nothing could go wrong . . .

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

THE GIRL BEHIND THE COUNter—crisp and trim in her dark blue airlines uniform—smiled brightly and handed me the ticket envelope. "There you are, Mr. James," she said. "You're ticketed through to Copenhagen and from there to Warsaw. They'll be calling your flight in about half an hour. And you will be required to show your passport and visas prior to boarding. Have a nice flight, sir."

"Thank you," I said. I stuffed the envelope into my jacket pocket and stopped to pick up my attaché case.

"Oh," the girl said, "there's a message here for you. Mr. Roy Wilson asked that you meet him in the cocktail lounge."

"Roy Wilson?" I said, frowning. "I'm afraid there must be some mistake. I don't know a Mr. Roy Wilson."

"I'm sure it's for you," she said slowly. "The note says specifically, Mr. James going on to Warsaw."

I shrugged and smiled wryly. "One way to make sure, isn't there?"

Her bright smile flashed again. "Yes, sir."

Wilson, I suspected, would turn out to be a salesman of some kind—flight life-insurance most likely. But I had half an hour to kill, so what did I have to lose? All I had to do was say no after he'd made his pitch.

If I'd had the slightest inkling of what I did stand to lose, I would have avoided that cocktail lounge like the plague.

But I crossed over to the lounge

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and stood in the doorway long enough to take off my topcoat and let my eyes adjust to the dimness within. As soon as I could see clearly I glanced around and tried to pick out Wilson. It wasn't difficult. Groups of two, three, or four clustered about most of the occupied tables. Only one man was sitting alone, at a table near the wall. He rose, half smiling, when I caught his eye and came forward to meet me.

"Mr. James? I'm Roy Wilson." He grasped the hand I'd extended automatically to meet his. "I'm glad you decided to take me up on my invitation. I hope it didn't sound too mysterious."

"Just mysterious enough," I said, "to make me curious."

"Fine," Wilson said, ushering me politely but firmly toward his table. "Curiosity is a trait that should be encouraged. And satisfied. So let me buy you a drink and tell you what it's all about. Here, I'll take your coat."

He whisked my topcoat off my arm and folded it neatly over the back of one of the chairs. Another topcoat—his own, I guessed—was similarly draped over the opposite chair.

We sat down facing each other and Wilson signaled the waitress.

"Another martini here," he said, "and—"

"Dry manhattan," I said. "Very dry."

After the waitress had left, Wilson steepled his fingers in front of his face and said thoughtfully through them, "You do a lot of traveling behind the Iron Curtain, don't you, Mr. James?"

I didn't like the implications of his question. "I have legitimate business interests that take me there," I said.

Wilson dropped his hands and smiled engagingly. "If that's any of my business," he said, putting my thought into words. "You're right. Why you're going to Poland is no concern of mine. All that matters is that you're going."

He paused for the waitress to set our drinks before us and bustle off again. He toyed with the bill for a moment, then casually slipped it into his pocket. When his hand emerged it held a small laminated plastic card which he slid across the table to me.

"Don't pick the card up, Mr. James," he said. "Just read it from where you are."

The lamp on our table cast enough light for me to make it out. It identified Roy Wilson as an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency.

I swallowed hard. "And just why," I said in what I hoped was a normal tone, "is the C.I.A. interested in my trips to Eastern Europe?"

"Not your trips, Mr. James. Just this specific trip to Poland.

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And the reason, I think, should be fairly obvious. We want you to work for us."

I stared at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Wilson asked as if he wanted to share the joke.

"You. Me. The whole idea. Look," I went on when he didn't respond, "I'm forty-three years old and according to my doctor fifteen pounds overweight. I haven't fired a shot in anger in my life or even hit anyone since junior high school. What's more, I have a wife and two teen-age daughters, all three of whom I love dearly." I shook my head slowly and perhaps a trifle sadly. "All in all," I said, "I'm about the most unlikely candidate for spy you could find."

"Which," Wilson said seriously, "is precisely the reason we want you."

I stopped laughing and Wilson continued in the same sober tone, "We don't expect you to go in and steal the plans to the latest Russian-built rocket or kidnap Gomulka or anything like that. That kind of stuff happens mostly in the movies anyway. But there is a man—pretty highly placed in the party too—who wants to come over to the West. Of course, we want to help him. But it's an extremely delicate situation. The slightest whiff of a rumor—" Wilson snapped his fingers sharply—"and that's it. That's why we can't use any of our regular people or try to bring the man out over the usual political refugee routes. Instead we plan to smuggle him into this country disguised as a U.S. tourist returning from abroad." He nodded toward his topcoat. "Sewn into the lining of that coat," he said, "is an American passport and the other papers he'll need for the trip. We want you to take them in to him."

"Who is this man?" I said. I was surprised to find that my hands were trembling.

"It's better if you don't know."

"Then how could I contact him?"

"You wouldn't. In fact, you and he would never meet. The way we have it planned is like this. On your second night in Warsaw you go to a small restaurant not far from the Old Town Market Square called The Golden Eagle. It's an excellent restaurant, so it wouldn't be out of line for a foreigner to visit the place.

"Arrange to get there about seven and hang your topcoat on the coatrack near the door." I noticed that Wilson had subtly shifted his tenses as if I had already accepted his proposal, but I didn't interrupt him. "Our man will arrange for someone to be in the restaurant ahead of you. When he leaves he'll simply take your

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coat as if by mistake. All you have to do is not 'discover' that the coat is missing until he's had twenty minutes or so to get clear." Wilson laughed shortly. "And considering the quality of service in Polish restaurants these days, that should be no problem at all."

"You're very persuasive," I said. "But how would this man recognize me?"

"Simple," Wilson said. "He'll arrange to get a glimpse of you when you check into your hotel." He smiled. "Don't worry. It's not difficult. Americans aren't that common in Poland these days. In any case, that's the plan. Now it's up to you. If you decide to go along with it just pick up my coat instead of yours when you leave." He glanced at his wrist watch. "Not to rush you, but if you're going to make the plane you'll have to leave now."

I rose involuntarily and stood beside my chair trying to organize the thoughts crowding into my brain.

As I think back on it I realized that I really had no choice—not with Wilson gazing up at me, his eyes half mocking, half challenging, and ready to reflect that terrible judgment, pity, if I refused.

I picked up his coat.

Wilson nodded approvingly. "You made a good decision, Mr. James," he said. "And don't worry. Positively nothing can go wrong with this one."

I didn't answer. I turned and left the lounge. As I stepped out into the lobby they were just beginning to call my flight.

Each time I go east of the Iron Curtain two things impress me anew. One is the ubiquitous red banner with its awkwardly phrased, bombastic slogan that even without the cold-war connotations would be embarrassing to the Westerner. The other is the almost paranoid preoccupation with espionage and security.

I spent my first fifteen minutes alone in my hotel room searching for the hidden microphone I knew would be there. I finally found it clipped to the inside of one of the bed legs. Not that I intended to destroy it or block its use in any way. That would have been foolish, not only because there were probably others more cunningly hidden, but also because any tampering would have merely called official attention to me—something which even under normal circumstances I could do without. No, it just made me feel better to know were the bug was located.

The next day—my first full one in Warsaw—was filled with the details of business that had brought me to Poland in the first place. The people I dealt with made some vague suggestions about dining that evening, but I think they were secretly relieved

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when, pleading fatigue from the long flight, I begged off.

As Wilson had said, The Golden Eagle was just off the Old Town Square. It was an unpretentious building and looked almost out of place beside the elegant, lovingly restored façades of the coffeehouses, restaurants, and wine cellars that comprised so much of the square itself. But I'd traveled enough to have learned that the best restaurants are often the least pretentious. Wilson had been wrong about one thing, though. The coatrack wasn't near the entrance. It was about halfway back on the wall leading into the interior of the main dining room. But that seemed a minor point, so I hung my topcoat on it and followed a black-jacketed waiter to my table.

I was no sooner seated than a small man on the other side of the room left his table and beelined for the coatrack. Once there he glanced around furtively, grabbed my coat, and scuttled toward the door with it still clutched in his hand.

He couldn't have done a better job of calling attention to himself if he'd tried.

My waiter dropped his order pad and shouted after him. I don't understand Polish, but there was no mistaking his cry: Stop thief!

The small man panicked and began to run. A second waiter materialized to block his path. The small man swerved and careened into a table. The two waiters pounced and dragged him kicking and screaming from the jumble of chairs, plates and food.

By the time it occurred to me that I should have slipped out in the confusion it was too late. The police were there. Nothing can go wrong, Wilson had said. Positively nothing can go wrong. But somehow it always does.

My waiter pointed me out to one of the policemen as the small man was carried, still protesting loudly, out of the restaurant. I felt my stomach curling into a tight knot as the policeman approached me with that deliberate arrogance you see in certain types of police the world over. He spoke abruptly, in Polish.

I tried to smile. "I'm sorry," I said, "I don't understand—"

Without waiting for me to finish, the policeman turned and beckoned peremptorily to my waiter. They spoke together at some length. Or rather the policeman spoke and the waiter listened.

When the policeman stopped, the waiter turned to me and said almost apologetically, "That man want to steal your coat. He must be punished. You must go with this man to the police station and make statement."

"Look," I said in what I hoped was a reasonable tone, "I'm a

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stranger here and I don't want to cause any trouble. Tell him I don't want to press charges against the man who took my coat."

The waiter stared at me blankly.

"I don't want to go to the police station," I said. "I don't want to make a statement. Tell the police they can let the man go. It was all just a mistake."

"No," the waiter said. "You must go. You must make statement." His voice had grown desperate as if he knew he would be punished if I failed to obey the police.

Throughout all this the policeman was regarding us both contemptuously. And I had a sudden intuition that he spoke English at least as well as the waiter.

I rose wearily. "All right," I told the waiter, "tell him I'll go."

I sat for three hours on a hard bench in the police station, forlorn and ignored, while a bored desk officer doodled on a pad before him and a sleepy-eyed guard braced his back against the wall beside the entrance. The bench grew harder and harder. And as my physical discomfort increased, my apprehension mounted. It didn't help my peace of mind, either, when another policeman appeared and held a whispered conversation with the desk officer and afterward the officer ceased his doodling to gaze speculatively at me.

It also didn't help that my topcoat with the incriminating papers sewn inside had been taken by the police as evidence.

It came as a relief when the policeman who had brought me from the restaurant appeared at a doorway at the far end of the room and beckoned to me. Not a word was said—just that curt peremptory motion of his hand and I responded like a puppy after a morsel of meat. And, of course, that was the reason I had been left sitting and fidgeting for three hours.

The policeman waited for me by the door, then closed it immediately behind me.

The room was bare of furnishings except for a wooden table and three chairs. Two men were sitting at the table and a third stood at the single window, gazing out. They were in civilian clothes but they had policemen's eyes. What captured my attention, though, and what I fought to keep from staring at lay on the table: a small pile of papers topped by the green and gold pasteboard oblong that was a U.S. passport.

The man at the window glanced at me without curiosity, then resumed his study of the outdoors. As if on cue, one of the men at the table—a thin man with a pale triangular face as ex-

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pressionless and predatory as a fox's—said harshly, "Come forward."

I stepped up to the table, uncertain as to whether I was expected to sit or not. Apparently I wasn't, because Foxface went on, "Who sent you to Warsaw?"

I cleared my throat nervously. "I came here on business," I said. "I work for a firm of American importers—"

He cut me off with an impatient wave of his hand. "We know all about your 'firm,' And we know it is a cover for your criminal acts of espionage against the Polish People's Republic. Now, who sent you here and why?"

"No one," I said, and my voice was the barest whisper.

Now the man at the window spoke up. Still without looking at me he said, "Does the prospect of twenty years in prison please you?"

Twenty years! Irrationally a scene from a novel I'd read years before flashed through my mind. In it the author had conveyed the astonishment and shock that a group of young men who had joined the Irish Republican Army as a lark had felt when one of their number captured by the British had been sentenced to twenty years in prison. To those young men, barely out of their teens, twenty years had seemed a lifetime.

Well, twenty years *was* a lifetime—the rest of my lifetime anyway. I thought of never seeing my wife and daughters, of never walking down a free American street again.

The man at the window had whirled to face me. "Well," he insisted, "does it?"

I finally managed to croak, "No."

"Then answer this man's questions if you hope to avoid it."

"Well?" Foxface said when the silence had dragged on too long.

I took a deep breath. "Before I say anything," I said, "I want to talk to someone from the United States Embassy."

Foxface's eyes flicked toward the window, then back to me. "As you wish," he said coldly. To the policeman rigid beside the door: "Take him away."

For some reason the picture of a Polish prison I had built up in my mind was something out of *The Count of Monte Cristo*: a dungeon deep underground, dark, with dripping stones and a straw pallet and perhaps a small barred window high up on one wall. Instead, the cell I was taken to was a steel cage—stark and modern and filthy. A metal bunk was set into one wall, and sanitation was provided for by a bucket in one corner. Out of reach overhead and screened by a fine wire mesh that in no way diminished its intensity,

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a light bulb burned fiercely. It wasn't turned off even once the whole time I was in that cell.

Because my watch had been taken from me along with my necktie, belt, and shoelaces, I quickly lost track of time. I tried for a while to keep count of the meals brought to me, figuring that three would make a day. But I began to suspect that they were deliberately brought at irregular intervals, and since they were always the same—watery soup and a chunk of coarse bread—breakfast became indistinguishable from lunch or dinner and I soon gave up the attempt.

Hell, I thought, must be like this: time stretching on interminably and filled with an improbable mixture of boredom, fear, and anguish. I wondered about my wife and daughters. Had they been told of my arrest? And if so, what did they think of it? Were they like the wives and families of other men held captive behind the Iron Curtain, seen occasionally on television, hoping against hope that all would come right in the end? What was Wilson doing to get me out? Anything? Unlikely. What *could* he do?

And where above all else—where was that man from the Embassy? The longer he delayed, the more convinced I became that he wasn't coming at all. I would rot here in this cell.

And then one day—or night—the door clanged abruptly open and two guards filled the doorway. To my shame I found myself crouching beside my bunk in terror. The guards exchanged contemptuous grins, then one of them motioned me to come with them.

As I left the cell, I felt a sudden panic. The cell was known to me; I was familiar with every square inch of it. Now I was leaving it—but for what? The urge to turn and flee back into its safety was almost overwhelming. As if he could read my thoughts, one of the guards clamped onto my arm and pulled me roughly along.

And perhaps he did know what I was thinking. This must have been an old story to him and certainly one prisoner wouldn't react too differently from another.

I was taken through a maze of echoing steel corridors to a door at the end of a short hallway. The guards halted at the mouth of the hallway and shoved me forward.

"In there," one said in English.

Clutching the last shreds of my self-control I went forward and opened the door.

The room was similar to the one where I had been interrogated before: the same kind of wooden table and a scattering of chairs. But this time only one man awaited me. Tall, youngish, sandy-haired, with the round smiling face of a friendly Irish

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pug, he half sat, half leaned on the edge of the table.

"Mr. James?" he said. "I'm Paul Lafferty. From the American Embassy."

Like a marionette with cut strings I dropped onto one of the chairs. "Thank God," I breathed.

Lafferty had started forward at my sudden collapse; now he leaned back against the table. "Looks like they've been giving you the deluxe treatment," he said. "How long have they been holding you?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Day—night, it's all one. They picked me up on the fifth."

"Two weeks then," Lafferty said thoughtfully. "Today's the nineteenth."

"It seems longer." I was surprised at how old and tired my voice sounded.

Lafferty nodded sympathetically. "I imagine it does." He paused, then blew out a great gust of breath. "To put it mildly, Mr. James," he went on, "you're in a mess. The Embassy will, of course, do everything in its power to help you. But quite frankly there's very little we can do. Espionage is a serious charge in any country and especially for a Westerner in a Communist country. Serious not only for the individual accused but for his country as well.

"So you'll understand that our official position must be that we know nothing about you." He smiled wryly. "And oddly enough that happens to be the truth. We *don't* know anything about you. Oh, it's not inconceivable that the C.I.A. would send in an agent without informing us at the Embassy. But if that agent were caught and we queried Washington about him we'd be told the truth. And the word from Washington is that nobody there has ever heard of you. So whoever you're working for it's not the U.S."

"But," I blurted out, "he had an identification—"

"I'm sure he did," Lafferty said. "But tell me honestly, Mr. James, would you recognize a C.I.A. or F.B.I. identification card? I mean, do you know what they're supposed to look like?"

"No," I said weakly.

"So," Lafferty said, "the 'identification' you were shown could very easily have been counterfeit." He pushed himself off the table and walked over to the window. "If you want my honest opinion, Mr. James," he said, looking out, "you were suckered into this by the Communists themselves."

"No," I said incredulously, "I can't believe that." Or could I? If it were true it would explain the extreme clumsiness of the attempt to switch coats at the Golden Eagle. But on the other hand—

"Surely," I said half to myself, "if they wanted to arrest me they

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wouldn't have to go to all that trouble. It would be simpler to find some pretext after I arrived in Poland."

Lafferty pounced on my words. "Simpler," he said, "but not as effective. This way they've got your guilt feelings working for them."

I sighed. "Perhaps you're right," I said. I turned my face up to him. "But why *me?*"

Lafferty shrugged. "There could be several reasons. I suppose they could be planning one of their propaganda trials. But I'm inclined to doubt that. Nobody really believes those trials any more—not even their own people. And, secondly, there's been no publicity about you at all. In fact, your wife was even sent a cable—ostensibly from you—saying that complications in your business dealings would delay your return. We didn't even hear about you ourselves until the day before yesterday, and they know we'll stay quiet to keep from prejudicing your chances.

"No, all in all, I'd be inclined to say that they were trying to recruit you as an agent of their own."

I started to speak but Lafferty held up a forestalling hand. "Don't look so shocked. A man like yourself who has a legitimate reason for traveling back and forth across the Curtain could be very valuable to them. Anyway, let's hope that *is* the case. It's your one hope of getting out of here."

I said slowly, "Are you seriously suggesting that I—"

"Work for the Communists?" he finished for me. "No, not really. We'll let them *think* you're one of theirs, but we'll set it up so that you're actually working undercover for us. Somebody will contact you shortly after you get back to the United States. Remember that. You will be contacted. Don't you try to contact anybody on your own." He laughed shortly. "You were fooled once and there's no sense taking any chances you don't have to."

"That's right," I said. "That's why I won't go along with your scheme."

"No?" Lafferty seemed amused. "I really don't think you have any alternative, Mr. James. Refuse the Communists and you spend twenty years in one of their prisons. Refuse us and you stand to spend twenty years in one of ours. A case, you might say, of double jeopardy. Either way it's not a pleasant prospect."

Lafferty had been standing during this speech. Now he sat down against the edge of the table and let one foot swing idly. "By the way," he said, "just to satisfy my own curiosity, what were those documents you smuggled in supposed to be used for anyway? Help some poor devil defect?"

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I shrugged. "Just the opposite," I said. "Make the Communists think somebody was planning to defect when he wasn't, so they wouldn't trust him any more. That's what I was told anyway."

Lafferty stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I see," he said. "Well, you think over what I said." He rose, went to the door, and signaled the guards that the interview was finished.

I did think about what Lafferty had said. And I worried. I did more than worry. I sweated.

Finally the Communists broke the tension. I was taken from my cell a second time and brought back to the fox-faced man and his two companions. As Lafferty had predicted, I was given the choice of working for them or of disappearing into one of their prisons.

I told them I'd work for them. Again, as Lafferty had said, I really had no choice.

Twenty-four hours later, shaved and scrubbed and looking on the surface at least the same man as the one who had come to Poland those short weeks before, I was put on a plane bound for Copenhagen and home. As soon as its wheels left the ground I began to tremble uncontrollably.

I lay over a week in Copenhagen to bring some semblance of order to my jangled nerves before facing my family. On my third night there, I had a visitor: Wilson, disguised as a room-service waiter.

"You get around," I said from the bed where I was lying fully clothed.

"The wonderful world of jet travel," Wilson said. He pushed the cart he'd brought into the room off into a corner. "Weren't you expecting me?"

"Yes," I said wearily. I sat up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. "I was expecting you."

"All right then. What happened?"

"Your man muffed switching the coats and I was arrested." I smiled ruefully. "I'd still be in jail if I hadn't agreed to be a spy for the Communists."

"And they believed you?" Wilson was watching me intently.

I let the smile grow more rueful. "Why not?" I said. "I'm supposed to think I'm really a double agent for the C.I.A. That's their way of insuring that I do what they want and don't run screaming to the nearest American Embassy or F.B.I. agent." As briefly as I could I told Wilson what had happened after my arrest.

"Well," he said when I finished, "to coin a phrase, very interesting. But, tell me, what made you so sure I wasn't what Lafferty claimed, a Commie myself?"

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"Lafferty," I said. "No Embassy man—particularly not one as competent as Lafferty seemed—would have talked so freely in a room that a kindergarten child would have known was bugged. And when the Communists still went ahead and put their offer to me, I knew I was right about him."

"Good thinking," Wilson said. "And good thinking too when you lied about why we sent you in. You just may have saved our man's life." He grinned widely and clapped me on the shoulder. "We'll make a professional of you yet."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said.

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a NEW story by

RAY RUSSELL

Meet an Old Enemy—a contemporary Beelzebub, a mod mod Mephistopheles, a hip Old Harry, a new Old Nick—or is it, an old New Nick? In any event, a Satanic story with a "difference"...

ACRES OF BREAD

by RAY RUSSELL

"WRITER'S BLOCK, MAN?" purred a slurring, sneering voice.

Grant Hayward's heart jumped and he turned from his typewriter to find a stranger standing in a particularly squalid corner of the shabby room he laughingly called his Hollywood apartment. The stranger looked young, wore his hair shoulder-length and greasy, was dressed in a skin-tight suit of black velvet with white neonlike piping, had a mouth like a shark, eyes like a heavily sedated vulture, and lacked only an electric guitar to complete his resemblance to an acid-rock singer.

"Who are you?" barked Hayward. "How long have you been here?"

"Oh, pretty long," drawled the stranger, "in one form or another. Long enough to know you've been glommin' that blank piece of paper for like an hour now. And before that there was another blank piece of paper. You typed two words on it, maybe three, then ripped it out and crumpled it up and shot it under the sink. And before that—"

"All right. Now who are you and what do you want?"

"Cool it, baby, that's my line—what do *you* want? A swingin' pad? Acres of bread? Fame? Chicks? You name it, I push it."

"Who are you?"

"Like I said, man, I push. I am The Pusher."

Hayward got the picture. "I see.

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So this is the way it happens. Interesting. Now what? A flaming contract, written in blood?"

The Pusher winced. "Oooh. That whole bag has got *sides* on it, Ferd. No, a plain old ballpoint will do fine. You want I should make you an offer?"

Hayward thought about it, but not for long. After a moderate success with his first short stories, five years before, his career had steadily disintegrated. Three completed novels languished, unpublished and dusty, in the bottom drawer of his dresser. About once a year he managed to get a low-grade TV assignment. Every Thursday he stood in line to collect his $65 unemployment compensation. "Why not?" he said, rising and reaching for his jacket. "But not here."

"Where we goin', Charlie?"

"The name is not Charlie. Neither is it Ferd, Baby, or Man. It is Grant Hayward—*Mister* Hayward to the likes of you—and we are going to lunch at the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills."

"How come?"

"Because that's the only place Sid Armstrong ever talks a deal."

"Sid what?"

"Come on," said Hayward, opening the door. "I never make a move without my agent."

The negotiations lasted all through cocktails, guacamole, bluepoints, soup, were almost broken off in the middle of the sirloin, and were resumed over coffee and cognac. During this time Barbra Streisand, Raquel Welch, and Faye Dunaway all strolled past their table but the three negotiators never gave them a first, much less a second, glance.

Sid Armstrong, bald as the eagle he resembled, peered down through his bifocals at a much-interlineated rough draft of a contract written by him in longhand on a special sandwich of paper consisting of three thin sheets divided by carbon paper and bound at the top, with a perforation for easy separating.

"Let's go through it once more," he said, manfully struggling with a belch. "You, Mr. Pusher, agree to furnish my client, Mr. Hayward here, with an idea for precisely one novel, no more, no less, which you guarantee will bring him 'acres of bread,' a term which shall be construed to mean that Mr. Hayward will be personally enriched by the sum of no less than One Million Dollars in the form of publisher's advance, royalties, paperback and foreign editions, and motion picture rights. In return for this my client agrees to bind himself exclusively to your company and render certain unspecified services unto the aforesaid company for a stipulated length of time which is to begin exactly seven years from this moment, and which is to last for, like you said, eternity.

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"It is further understood that such subsidiary or 'fringe' benefits as a swinging pad, fame, chicks, et cetera, although not to be specifically provided by you, are assumed to be the natural concomitant of the aforesaid 'bread' or One Million Dollars. You acknowledge that you enter into this contract freely and openly, without any mental reservations or hidden codicils, terms which in this context are construed to mean any of the usual double-meanings, switches, tricks, betrayals, or other such diabolic devices familiar to legend, grand opera, and popular literature.

"You further acknowledge that your service provided hereunder is of a special, unique, unusual, extraordinary, and intellectual character, the loss of which cannot be reasonably or adequately compensated in damages in an action at law, and by reason thereof you agree that, should you break *any* of the terms of this contract, or should you fail to cause the delivery of the aforesaid One Million Dollars into the personal fortune of my client, this contract will be considered null and void." Sid Armstrong looked up. "All in order, Mr. Pusher?"

"Yeah, yeah," said The Pusher in a bored whisper, "it's all groovy except for one little thing."

Sid smiled. "You drive a hard bargain. But you're right, I left out a clause. We'll put it back in. Because of the unusual nature of this contract, and because the diminution of the stated sum by even one cent would nullify the contract—as stated in the above paragraph—it is agreed that the ten percent commission customarily collected by Mr. Hayward's authorized representative, Sidney K. Armstrong, will, in this case, *not* be collected, and Mr. Armstrong will receive no fee for his services in this transaction. Sign here, gentlemen. And initial over here in the margin. That's it. Fine." With a single sharp snap, Sid popped the perforation and distributed the three copies.

"Later, man," The Pusher leered at Hayward. "Like seven years later." And then he was gone.

"Sid," said Hayward, "I hope you don't mind if I eat and run? All of a sudden I have this *terrific* idea I want to get to work on right away."

"Sure, kid, go ahead," said Sid Armstrong, and when Hayward left the Lounge, the agent unfolded the contract and read it again, slowly, with an ever broadening smile.

Acres of Bread, the new novel by Grant Hayward, was snapped up by one of the big new computerized superpublishers, Tribourne Press, for a modest advance of $15,000. Chihuahua Books advanced $30,000 for the

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paperback r i g h t s. Tantamount Studios paid $500,000 for the film rights. English and foreign editions, plus royalties on all editions including the Book-of-the-Month Club edition, resulted in another $455,000. Total: One Million Dollars.

In the six years that followed, Hayward blew the dust off the manuscripts in the bottom drawer of his dresser and unloaded every one of them, through Sid Armstrong, for enormous sums, on the strength of his now-famous name. These novels, it turned out, were not bad; they had merely been written before their time, and now, their time having come, they sold like crazy and Hayward received the praise of critics and public alike. He had a swinging pad, fame, chicks, acres of bread, but was he happy? He certainly was.

Then, precisely seven years to the millisecond after the signing of that contract in the Polo Lounge, The Pusher appeared in the posh study of Hayward's swining pad.

"Come on, Melvin," he mumbled, "let's split."

"Hi there," said a slightly plumper Hayward. "Been expecting you. I take it you're here in regard to our contract?"

"You better believe it," said The Pusher.

"Then I think you should speak to my agent," smiled Hayward, as Sid Armstrong strolled in from the living room.

"Hello, Pusher," Sid said. "You want something?"

"I want *him,*" snarled The Pusher, thrusting a grimy, nail-bitten finger at Hayward.

Sid yawned. "No deal. Read your contract again."

"I don't have to! This cat's made *more* than a million in the last seven years. Every book he's touched has been a gass. And—"

"Correct," said Sid. "But what have his other books got to do with it? The fact that we were fortunate enough to market some earlier manuscripts of his for a great deal of money has nothing to do with our agreement. You have no claim on him on *that* score."

"Then cool that. He made a million on the first one and—"

Sid shook his head and smiled. "You've got a reputation as a shrewd cookie, but you're not on your toes. You may dress modern and talk modern, but face it, Pusher, you're a back number, you're behind the times, you don't keep up with things. Our contract definitely states that my client is bound to your company only if he is personally enriched by the sum of no less than One Million Dollars from the novel based on the idea you furnished him."

"You think I don't r e a d *Publishers Weekly* and *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*?"

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screamed The Pusher. "One million skins is exactly what he got!"

"One million skins," said Sid, "is what he *grossed*. The Government took most of that. Of course, my client didn't mind too much, because he's done very well on his other books, and I haven't done so bad myself since I *did* collect commission on those . . . all of which has nothing whatever to do with you. So long, Mr. P. My client has no business to conduct with you. Why don't you try dragging the Department of Internal Revenue to damnation? It would make you an awful lot of friends."

At last report The Pusher was working on that, along with several other deals, through his newly authorized representative, Sidney K. Armstrong. Nowadays he never makes a move without his agent.

'Q'

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A brief editorial comment follows this story—but please read the story first . . .

THE ABSOLUTELY SAFE SAFE

by ALAN K. YOUNG

"MR. BILLINGS?"

"Speaking."

"Mr. Horace Billings of 42 Crescent Court, Glenfield?"

"That is correct."

"Mr. Billings, this is Sergeant Ellis of the Winslow Barracks, State Police."

"Oh, yes, Sergeant. I suppose it's about my burglary you're calling. I hope you've caught the scoundrel—or better yet, that you've recovered my safe."

"Well, sir, we think maybe we've done both, but we're going to need your help to make sure."

"I'll be happy to do all I can, of course. I hope the idiot hasn't made a mess of it trying to force it open?"

"No, sir. At least the safe we've got here hasn't been damaged."

"Well, that's good. Not that he could've gotten it open short of an atomic blast, but I'd hate to have it all marked up; I only bought it two months ago. But tell me, Sergeant, how did you manage to find it so fast?"

"Assuming we *have* found it, sir, it was more or less by accident. What happened, one of our patrolmen stopped to investigate a rear-ender accident out on Route 12 this morning. The impact had sprung the trunk lid on one of the cars, and the two men in that car were all in a sweat trying to get it closed again when our man drove up. At first he didn't think too much about it, but then while he was questioning the other driver, these guys piled back into their car and took off. Of course they claim they thought he was through with them, but he says he'd clearly told them to wait. At any rate, once he'd pulled them over again, he went back and opened up their trunk, and sure enough, they had a safe in there that was identical in appearance to one on this morning's hot sheet—the one you'd reported stolen from your store the night before last."

"A Milton Securama Special, Model D?"

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"That's the one."

"Well, that's splendid, Sergeant! You have no idea how relieved I am. I've got the entire receipts from my holiday-week sale in there, and not one cent of insurance. That's why I bought such an outrageously expensive safe in the first place, you see—so I could tell that money-grubbing insurance company where to head off. And of course having paid through the nose for a burglar-proof safe I never dreamed anybody would be stupid enough to cart it off bodily."

"A real pro wouldn't have, Mr. Billings. But neither of these guys has a record, so if this is your safe they've got, this was probably their first time out."

"Well, I appreciate your getting it back for me, Sergeant, even if it was by accident. And even if it does seem a bit wasteful of the taxpayers' money for you to call me long distance."

"I guess this does seem like sort of an extravagance, sir, and ordinarily we would have teletyped the information to our Chatsford Barracks and let them get in touch with you. But we've got a bigger staff down here, and since this little problem we have won't wait, we thought maybe we'd better help them out a little today. Because of course the whole force is as busy as Santa Claus, it being just before Christmas and all."

"Well, if my state taxes are anything to judge by, Sergeant, you're all being well paid for your efforts. Not that I'm convinced they're necessary, as far as this holiday nonsense is concerned. I've always maintained that if a lot of idiots want to take to the highways during the holiday season, then if they get into trouble they ought to have to get out of it on their own, and not run up a lot of tax bills for those of us who are sensible enough to stay at home."

"There's no denying our job would be a lot easier if more people felt the way you do, Mr. Billings. Which makes it sort of awkward for me to ask you this, knowing what the highway traffic's like, but could you possibly see your way clear to driving down here today to help us clear this thing up?"

"Driving—! All the way to Winslow? Are you out of your mind, Sergeant? I certainly cannot see my way clear. Why good grief, man, that's over two hundred miles! What do you need me for anyway?"

"To make the identification, sir."

"Identification? Sergeant, my safe was carted off at night. How the devil could I be expected to identify the thieves?"

"Oh, not the men, sir—the safe. We need you to identify the safe."

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"Good lord, Sergeant, you don't need me for that! I gave a complete description to your investigating officer when he was down here from Chatsford yesterday. I'm sorry I couldn't give him the serial number—I know darn well I've got it around here somewhere, but I've been without a bookkeeper a couple of weeks and everything is at sixes and sevens and I just can't seem to find it. But I told your man I'd write to the company, who'll have it registered, of course, and they'll send—"

"But that'll be too late, sir. Maybe if you could phone them—?"

"Long distance clear to Los Angeles? You've got to be kidding, Sergeant! Either that or you've got a lot of stock in the phone company. What do you need it for anyway, when you've got my description? The thing's about four feet tall—"

"Yes, sir, I've got a teletyped copy right here, but according to the local representative of the Milton Safe Company all their Model D Securama Specials look the same. So if you don't know your serial number the only way we could identify this safe as yours is by what's inside, and as the officer from Chatsford probably told you, our regulations forbid us opening a safe except in the presence of the owner or his authorized representative. That's why we can't even ask for the combination in a situation like this. I don't suppose your safe had anything to distinguish it by on the outside, did it? Any knicks or scratches, anything like that?"

"It most certainly did not. And it had better not have any when I get it back, either. If you people go knocking it about—"

"Don't worry, sir, we won't; it'll be fine. As a matter of fact, right now that's part of our problem. This safe we've got shows no signs of attempted forcible entry, which means that if it *is* yours, those guys were holed up somewhere all day yesterday without even trying to get it open to see what was in it, which doesn't seem very likely."

"Part of your *problem?* For your information, Sergeant, that safe cost me more than you make in a month. It has two layers of a ferrous alloy guaranteed to withstand even an acetylene blowtorch; it has a center layer of concrete for heatproofing; it has what they call a keyless permutation lock and *two* sets of bolting actions, with the second one fixed so that it'll be engaged by any explosion set off to wreck the first. And a charge strong enough to wreck them both will bring whatever building you're in down around your ears, believe me. Any burglar worth his salt is supposed to know all that and pass up a Securama Special like

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poison. So then I have to come up with a couple of s-t-u-p-i-d amateurs."

"It looks that way, sir; like I said, these guys don't have any prior arrest records. But it's what they *do* have that's our real problem, Mr. Billings; they've got what seems to be a perfectly valid bill of sale for that same make and model of safe, and the guy who's supposed to have sold it to them last week in Cleveland can't be reached for us to check it out."

"A bill of sale for a safe exactly like mine, two days after mine was stolen? That seems like a rather astounding coincidence to me, Sergeant."

"That's the way it strikes us, too, sir, especially seeing how suspicious they acted after the accident and how uncooperative they've been since we brought them in. And that's why we'd hate like the devil to have to let them walk out of here again with that safe."

"Well, I should hope so, considering that it's almost certainly my safe. But I still don't see your problem. Just tell *them* to open it up for you. If they can't it's obviously because it's not theirs and they don't know the combination."

"But that's just it, sir, we have asked them to open it for us and they've refused."

"Well, there you are, Sergeant! What possible reason could they have for refusing to open it if it was really theirs?"

"They've been citing the Fifth Amendment, sir."

"The *what?*"

"The Fifth Amendment. You k-n-o-w—o-f the Constitution? They've been refusing to open the safe or give us the combination on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate them."

"Well, good grief, man! What more proof do you have to have that they're a couple of crooks?"

"I'll admit it looks v-e-r-y suspicious, sir, but legally it isn't proof of anything. It could be that it's your safe and they don't know how to open it, but it could also be that it is their safe and does contain evidence of some other criminal activity—like dope, maybe, or numbers slips. In that case, Judge Morgan—he's our local magistrate—says that although he hasn't come u-p against that one before, he thinks probably they are within their Constitutional rights in refusing to open it. And then there's always the possibility that they haven't done anything wrong at all, but are just so doggone mad at being arrested just before a holiday over a minor traffic mix-up that they're just damned well not going to cooperate with us for love nor money. In which case Judge Morgan says they're misusing the Fifth Amendment, but that

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ıe can't hardly blame them."

"He can't hardly b l a m e —? Good grief! Another one of these bleeding-heart judges and he's got urisdiction over my safe! Well, t seems to me, Sergeant, that any way you look at it these men are guilty of *something*—either they've stolen my safe or they're peddling dope or they're misusing the Constitution of the United States, which sounds like treason to me, or they've done something else equally criminal. So I suggest you lock them up on whatever grounds seem best to you and that big-hearted judge of yours and I'll come down with a truck early next week to make the identification for you and take back my safe."

"But we can't hold them till next week, Mr. Billings! Holiday or no holiday, the law says they've got to be given a hearing within twenty-four hours of their arrest, which means before noon tomorrow. And since all we've been able to charge them with is a misdemeanor—leaving the scene of an accident—Judge Morgan can't refuse to set bail or even set it very high. And we know darn well they can meet it."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to let them go then, although it seems to me like a hell of a poor excuse for justice. But as long as you've got my safe—"

"But that's just it, Mr. Billings! Once they're out on bail we can't stop them from taking the safe with them, because it doesn't constitute evidence of the crime they've been charged with. Leaving the scene of an accident, that is."

"Well, then charge them with burglary, for heaven's sake! You can't just let them walk off again with my safe!"

"But we *can't* charge them with burglary, sir. We can't book them for stealing a brand-new safe when they have what appears to be a valid bill of sale for it, just because we have a few unverified suspicions. Believe me, sir, if there were any way at all that we could hold them without bothering you, or even let them go and still hold on to the safe, we'd do it, but we're powerless without a positive identification of the safe. And that's something only you can give us. I know the traffic's going to be miserable and you probably won't get back to Glenfield till the middle of the night, but I tell you, sir, there's no other way."

"And I tell you, Sergeant, that my coming down today is out of the question! For one thing, I'm here alone, which means I'd have to close up early, and I simply can't afford to. I know it's hard for you civil servants to grasp, but some of us actually have to work for a living."

"Well, if you can't make it tonight, sir, how about tomorrow

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morning? Judge Morgan was planning to take the day off, but we've got until noon, so maybe I could persuade him to sit for a few minutes in the morning. He isn't going to like it, but—"

"No, Sergeant, tomorrow's just as impossible. We always have a big day here in Glenfield the day before a holiday and farm people from miles around come in to shop, and I can't afford to lose the business."

"Yes, sir, I understand that. But couldn't you let your clerk or someone take care of the store?"

"And leave him alone with the cash register? It's obvious, Sergeant, that you've never been in business for yourself."

"No, sir. Well, then is there anyone you could send down as your representative? Your bookkeeper, maybe, or your wife?"

"I fired my last bookkeeper two weeks ago; he was unreliable and incompetent. And as for my wife, no man in his right mind is going to spend a small fortune on an impregnable safe and then turn around and give the combination to a woman. Not that I'd have trusted my good-for-nothing bookkeeper with it either, as far as that goes."

"Well, sir, I guess that's it then. You do understand, don't you, that when we let these guys go, we can't stop them from taking the safe with them?"

"I understand, Sergeant. And *you* had better understand that I am not without influence in the capital, and if you and the rest of your force down there want to avoid trouble, you'd better be damned sure not to let those crooks give you the slip."

"The slip, sir?"

"Well, you're certainly going to have them followed, aren't you? You're not planning to let a couple of dangerous criminals disappear with my safe?"

"But we don't know that they're criminals, sir, or even that it *is* your safe. Besides, they can be over the state line and out of our jurisdiction half an hour after they leave here."

"Well, good grief, Sergeant! Other states have police forces, don't they? Surely you fellows must sometimes cooperate on important cases like this?"

"Other states don't have the manpower, sir, any more than we do, to tail two men because of an unverified suspicion."

"Then you mean to say you're just going to sit there and do nothing?"

"I'll tell you what I *can* do, sir. I can give you the name of a good man here in Winslow I'm almost certain will be available. And by phoning him now you could have him on the job before we let these fellows go, around five."

"*I* could have? You mean a

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private detective? Someone I'd have to pay?"

"I don't think this man would run you more than twenty-five dollars a day, plus expenses, Mr. Billings."

"Well, if you think I'm going to open my veins to a bloodsucker like that, Sergeant, you've got another think coming."

"Does that mean you'll be coming down yourself, sir?"

"It does not. It means I'm going to give you the combination over the phone and you can make the identification. There are plenty of papers in that safe with my name on them. And there's also plenty of cash, and you'd better believe I know exactly how much, Sergeant, because if there's so much as one nickel—"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't allow that. It's against regulations for us to open any safe, strongbox, or other locked depository except in the presence of the owner or his authorized—"

"Regulations be d a m n e d, Sergeant! You're asking me to make a four-hundred-mile round trip in the middle of all this insane holiday traffic on the chance that you've stumbled onto my safe. Well, who's going to pay me for the gas and the oil and the wear and tear on my car, can you tell me that? And if it turns out *not* to be my safe at all and this whole thing's been a wild goose chase, is that bleeding-heart judge of yours going to make those two crooks pay my expenses? My foot, he is! No, Sergeant, under normal circumstances t h a t regulation makes a lot of sense, but not when it's going to force an already abused taxpayer to pay through the nose to solve the very crime he's been a victim of. So do you have a pad and pencil handy? Because I'm going to give you the combination."

"Please, Mr. Billings, I wish you'd reconsider. I could get in Dutch with my captain—"

"Are you ready? Then take this down: left two full turns from zero to 119, right a partial turn to—"

"Yes, sir?"

"I was just thinking, Sergeant. I suppose this is a rather—er—rash thing for me to do. I wonder if—"

"I've got an idea, sir. If you insist on giving me the combination, why don't you hang up, get the number of the Winslow Barracks from Information, and then call me back? That way you'll be sure there's no hanky-panky."

"You know, Sergeant, that's a darn good idea. Now who is it I should ask for again?"

"Ellis, sir. Sergeant Ellis. Oh, but there is one thing, Mr. Billings—our switchboard h e r e isn't allowed to accept any collect long-distance calls—it's another one of those regulations to protect the taxpayer; you know, because

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there are so many cranks and screwballs around these days? So if you don't mind I'll have to ask you to put the call through on your number. It shouldn't cost you very much."

"That's one of the s i l l i e s t regulations I've ever heard of. I don't suppose—? Oh, to heck with it. I'll call you just a few minutes after six."

"After six, sir? But that's more than four hours from now."

"I'm quite aware of t h a t, Sergeant. I'm also aware that six o'clock is when the reduced long-distance rates go into effect. The state may enjoy throwing money away, but I don't."

"But six will be too late, Mr. Billings. The Judge plans to take off at five, and he'll have to set their bail before he leaves."

"I thought you said you could get him to come in tomorrow morning?"

"Well, yes, sir, but that was if you were coming down yourself and couldn't make it before then. But I can't very well ask him to give up his holiday because of the difference in telephone rates between now and six o'clock."

"No, I don't suppose he would understand that, would he? Not after a lifetime spent wallowing in the public trough. Oh, for heaven's sake, this is ridiculous! Go ahead and take this down: left two full turns from zero to 119, right a partial turn to 27—and when you open the safe, Sergeant, I suggest you do it in the presence of a group of your senior officers—then, left again three full turns to 86. Now when you get that far—and it might not be a bad idea to have that Judge What's-his-name there too—when you get that far, pull the knob out as far as it will go, turn it one full circle to the right to 141, then push it in again. Now have you got all that?"

"I think so, sir. Left two full turns from zero to 119, right a partial turn to 27, left three full turns to 86. Then you pull the knob toward you as far as it'll go, turn it one full turn to the right stopping at 141, and then push it all the way in."

"That's it, Sergeant. And don't forget that last bit or the second bolting action will be engaged when you try to open the door and then *nobody* will get it open—not without sending it back to the factory. That's why they call it 'The Absolutely Safe Safe,' you see, because no matter how clever a burglar may be—he can know every trick in the book, he can have all the latest tools, he can be an absolute master of explosives—he still isn't going to get that safe open and live to tell about it. Not unless he can somehow sweet-talk the owner into giving him the combination, and of course no—

"What's that humming noise?

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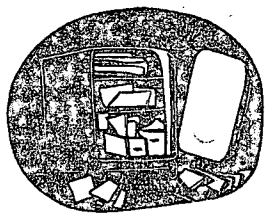
Sergeant? Are you there, Sergeant? Sergeant?
"Now why the devil would he hang up on me like that without even . . . saying . . . good . . . *grief!*"

EDITORIAL COMMENT: "The Absolutely Safe Safe" read so swiftly that perhaps you did not become aware that the story was told entirely in dialogue—no exposition, no descriptive passages, not a single interruption in the one long-distance telephone call. A short story in play form without even the need for stage directions is, in its own way, a 'tec tour de force . . .



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THE REVOLVER

by ANTON CHEKHOV

As soon as Fedor Sigaev found out that his wife was unfaithful to him, he decided to revenge himself, and for that purpose he paid a visit to the shop of Schmucks & Co., dealers in all kinds of firearms, and asked the man to show him a good revolver. His face expressed anger, sorrow, and irrevocable decision.

"I know what I am about to do," he thought. "My honor has been trodden in the mud, the sanctity of my family outraged, and wickedness is triumphant; therefore I, as a good citizen and an honest man, must appear as the avenger. First I shall slay my wife and her lover, then myself."

He had not, as yet, bought a revolver, nor had he shot anyone, but his imagination already pictured to him the wounds he would inflict, the crowds of people, and the scenes at the inquest. With the malignity of a deeply offended man he imagined the horror of his relatives and the public in general, the mortal agony of his faithless wife, and even saw in his mind's eye the large headlines in the papers and the editorials about the breaking up of family life.

The shopman, an active little man with a paunch and white vest, displayed before him on the counter several revolvers, and with a deferential smile on his lips, continually scraping with his feet, said, "I would advise you, sir, to take this splendid revolver. The newest make of Smith & Wesson. It is the latest thing in firearms; it has six chambers with an extractor. Just look at its beautiful workmanship. The very latest, sir. We sell dozens every

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day for defense against marauders, wolves, and the wreckers of family happiness. The bullet strikes surely and powerfully, can hit at a considerable distance, and kills outright the faithless wife and her lover. As to suicides, I can assure you, sir, that I know of no better make."

The man lowered and lifted it in the air, pulled the trigger, took aim, and handled the weapon lovingly as if he could not contain his enthusiasm. Looking at his rapturous face one could think that he would gladly have sent a bullet through his head if he only possessed a revolver of such beautiful workmanship as Smith & Wesson's.

"What is the price?" asked Sigaev.

"Forty-five rubles."

"M-m. It is too expensive."

"In that case I will offer you a cheaper one. We have a large assortment at different prices. For instance, this revolver is of a French make. The price is only eighteen rubles, but," —the man's face expressed contempt—"this make is an old-fashioned one; it is bought now only by proletarians and women cranks. To commit suicide or to shoot one's wife with such a revolver is considered now a sign of vulgarity. Polite society recognizes only Smith & Wesson."

"I am not going to kill anyone or to commit suicide. I simply need a revolver to frighten away thieves from my summer cottage."

"It is none of our business what you are buying a revolver for," said the man, "If we should try to find out the reasons in every case, we should be compelled, sir, to close our shop. For frightening away thieves this revolver is no good, sir, because it produces a dull, weak sound. I would suggest that you buy one which is generally used—the Mortimer pistol or, as it is commonly known, the dueling pistol."

"Would it not be a good idea to call him out?" ran through Sigaev's head like lightning. "But no, that would be too much honor—such a beast ought to be killed outright like a rabid dog."

The man, gracefully turning and scraping his feet, put before him a whole heap of revolvers without ceasing to smile and to chat. But somehow a Smith & Wesson seemed to Sigaev more desirable and imposing than the rest. He took one of them in his hands and sank into thought. His imagination pictured to him how he would fire through her head and the blood would pour from the wound, over the carpets and parquet floor, and how the dying adulteress would writhe in mortal agony.

"That would not do," he thought. "I should do much better

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to kill him and myself—her I will spare. Let her live and suffer all the harrowing pangs of remorse, and suffer the contempt of all who come in contact with her. That would be much worse for a nervous, oversensitive nature like hers than death."

And he pictured to himself his funeral: he, the offended one, was lying in his coffin with a gentle smile on his lips, and she, pale and worn out with remorse, walked in his funeral cortege like a veritable Niobe, and did not know where to hide from the contemptuous glances the highly indignant people threw at her.

"I see, sir, that you like Smith & Wesson best," the clerk suddenly disturbed him in his dreams. "If the price seems too high to you, I am willing to let you have it five rubles cheaper. Besides, we have still other makes, slightly cheaper."

The little man turned gracefully to the shelves and took down other revolvers.

"Here is one for thirty rubles. That is not expensive, if you consider that our currency has fallen terribly and the import duty on foreign makes is becoming higher every day. 'Pon my honor, sir, I am a conservative by nature and even I begin to grumble! Judge for yourself, sir, things have come to such a pass that only the rich can allow themselves the luxury of a good revolver! The poor must satisfy themselves with revolvers of cheap Russian make, namely, those which are made in Tula, and the Tula make is a —misfortune! You fire at your wife and hit your own shoulder."

Sigaev suddenly felt very sorry that he would not live to see the suffering of the adulteress. Revenge is only sweet when one can see and gloat at one's enemy's sufferings. What good would his revenge do him when he would lie in his grave and not see the havoc it had wrought?

"Would it not be better," he thought, "to kill *him* first, be present at *his* funeral and only kill myself afterwards? But I should be arrested long before that and my revolver would be taken away from me. And so I will kill him, her I will spare, and I—I will not commit suicide at first, but will let myself be arrested instead. There is always time enough to kill oneself. An arrest would give me an opportunity to show the jury and society in general the whole baseness of conduct. If I should be fool enough to kill myself she would probably succeed, with her characteristic boldness and natural aptitude for lying, to clear herself of all guilt and put all blame on me, and society would perhaps justify her action; and — who knows?—probably laugh at me; if, on the contrary, I should remain alive, then—"

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A moment later he thought: "Yes, and besides, if I should kill myself I should probably be accused and suspected of being prompted by a petty impulse. And, in truth, why should I kill myself? Besides, to shoot oneself would be to confess cowardice. And so I will kill him, and will leave her alive. As to myself, I shall be arrested. On the trial she would have to figure as a witness. I can easily imagine her confusion when questioned by my lawyer! The sympathy of the press and the public would in such a case undoubtedly be on my side."

He considered, and the salesman continued to display before him his goods and dutifully to serve his customer.

"Here are some revolvers of English make which we received but a short time ago, but I assure you that they pale to nothing before the Smith & Wesson. The other day—you, of course, have seen it in the papers—an army officer bought from us a revolver of the Smith & Wesson make. He fired at his wife's seducer and—what do you suppose?—the bullet went right through his chest, then it went through a bronze lamp, then the piano, and from the piano it rebounded, killing a spaniel and wounding the wife. A splendid feat, and one which does honor to our firm. The officer is now under arrest.

"Of course, he will be found guilty and sentenced to a number of years of penal servitude in Siberia. That is, first, because our laws are too antiquated and, secondly, because the jury is almost in every instance overpartial to the seducer. Why? Because the judges, jury, and public prosecutor all have a weakness for breaking the tenth commandment, and they do not care in the least if there be one husband less in Russia. As to society—I really believe it would enjoy nothing better than the deportation of all husbands to Saghalin.

"Oh, sir, you cannot imagine what a feeling of indignation fills my heart when I think of the deplorable state of our contemporary morals! Why, to love the wife of another is just as much in vogue as to smoke someone else's cigars or to read someone else's books. Our trade is falling off every year more and more—that does not mean that family life has become purer and the breaking of the tenth commandment rarer—but simply that the husbands are reconciled to their fate and are afraid of the courts and of penal servitude."

The clerk looked about cautiously and whispered: "And whose fault is it, sir? Why, only the Government's!"

"Where is the wisdom of going to Saghalin on account of such a pig?" thought Sigaev. "If I should be sent to Siberia my wife

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would be free to marry again, and to betray her second husband; she would be triumphant. And so I shall not kill her; myself, also not; *him* I shall also not kill. I must find another way to revenge myself—one more sensible and more painful. I will pay them with contempt and will institute against her divorce proceedings in which her scandalous conduct will be shown before all the world and she will be forever disgraced."

"Here, sir, is still another make," said the shopman, taking down a dozen revolvers. "I ask you to turn your attention to the peculiar mechanism of the lock."

Sigaev, after his decision, no longer needed a revolver, and wished nothing better than to get out of the shop. The salesman in the meanwhile waxed more and more enthusiastic, and did not tire of displaying his goods.

The offended husband felt conscience-stricken at the sight of the salesman, who was giving himself so much trouble displaying his wares, smiling, turning, scraping, and trying with all his might to please him, the customer.

"Very well, in that case," he muttered, "I will call later on, or—or will send someone."

He endeavored not to see the expression on the shopman's face, but, to smooth out at least a little the awkward position to which he had brought himself, he felt it necessary to buy something. But what? He looked around the walls of the shop, wishing for something cheap, and his eyes rested on a net which hung near the door.

"This—what is this?" he asked.

"That is a net for catching quail."

"What is the price of it?"

"Eight rubles, sir."

"I will take one."

The offended husband paid the eight rubles, took the net, and left the shop.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

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UNNATURAL EVIDENCE

by WILLINE McKEE

WHEN I KNOCKED ON THE door of the hotel suite, I expected to hear a man's voice. The feminine voice that called "Come in" sounded annoyed.

I checked my watch before opening the door. The time was 3:00 p.m., the correct time for the appointment.

As I entered the room I explained, "I'm Mrs. Laurie Scott, the hotel stenographer. Mr. Roberts asked for me at three."

The woman standing there, surrounded by boxes and packages, studied me curiously. Ever since I was fifteen, women have looked at me like that. I like the ones who accept my beauty and look for the person behind it. I liked Mrs. Roberts.

She smiled wryly, "You look like his secretary back home. Please sit down. My husband will be in soon, I'm sure."

She seemed to forget about me, and in turn I looked at her. She was about 45, a slight plain wo-

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man, with brown hair and brown eyes; she was expensively but unbecomingly dressed.

"I've been on a shopping spree," she explained suddenly. "I came along unexpectedly with my husband, so I'm taking advantage of all the new shops. Now that I've bought all this—"she waved at the boxes and packages—"I wonder why." She paused and added thoughtfully, "All my life I've bought things and then wondered why."

Through the open door of the bedroom I could see more packages, some open to reveal the bright lovely colors of lingerie, dresses, and accessories.

"These are probably the most foolish things I bought," she exclaimed, "because I am really the outdoor type."

From what looked like an elongated hat box she took out one of those foot-high blonde wigs and put it on. Turning she asked hopefully, "How do I look?"

I couldn't destroy that hopefulness by saying that it made her look cheap and unnatural.

My reply was tactful. "It's certainly a stunning color."

I knew she had noticed my evasiveness by the quick shrewd look she gave me. Then her face softened.

"Does it help to look the way you do?" she asked simply.

I didn't pretend.

"No, it doesn't help," I said.

She returned the blonde wig to its box and took out another wig.

"This one is for convenience," she said, putting it on, "not to look stunning." This wig was the same color as her own hair, but longer, glossier, and smoother. This one did suit her, and I told her so.

We talked aimlessly for a few moments until I suggested that perhaps I had better leave and come back when her husband was there. Mrs. Roberts hadn't time to answer before the door opened noisily and a man whom I instantly disliked entered. He was tall, muscular, and handsome except for small deep-set eyes.

"I'm Tracy Roberts," he announced. "Are you the public steno?" Not once had he looked at his wife or made any acknowledgment of her presence, but his eyes toured me with open interest. Many women would mistake his ego and bluntness for masculine traits. I recognized them, from experience, as signs of cruelty.

When I had established my identity, he gave his wife his uninterested attention. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

Her eyes measured him with distaste. "Frankly, I hadn't thought about it," she answered. She gathered some of her purchases and started for the bedroom. At the door she remembered me. "Goodbye, Mrs.

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Scott," she said politely.

The work that Roberts gave me was routine. He made only one approach. He leaned cozily against my shoulder as he asked me to read back a paragraph. Deliberately I raised my eyes to his; what he saw in them caused him to move away—but not before I saw the anger on his face.

Roberts finished his dictation more rapidly after that. As I prepared to leave he asked, "Can you have these ready at five?"

"I can have them sooner if you'd like," I replied.

"No, I have an appointment, and I won't be back before five," he answered curtly. He walked to a window, beginning to unbutton his shirt, and I assumed I was dismissed.

At the door I said routinely, "Thank you, Mr. Roberts." He made no reply; he was the kind of man who didn't bother to be courteous unless he received something from the effort.

As I returned to my desk, I couldn't help feeling sorry for Mrs. Roberts. I knew Roberts' type; I had been married to someone like him.

Later a telephone call interrupted my work. As I talked at my desk on the mezzanine, I saw Roberts come out of an elevator and hurriedly cross the hotel lobby.

Promptly at five I knocked again on the Roberts' door. There was no sound from inside the suite. As I stood there, I heard the elevator stop, and Roberts came rushing down the corridor.

"Come in, come in," he breathed. He surprised me by allowing me to go first. I was startled to see water spreading slowly from under the bedroom door.

"Mr. Roberts!" I exclaimed, pointing. He stood still for a second, then pushed me aside to hurry through the bedroom to the bathroom. I gasped when I saw the overflowing tub with Mrs. Roberts lying at the bottom, a queer greenish color reflected from the soft green of the tub.

Through whirling nausea I heard Roberts say, "She must have fainted while taking a bath." He started to move as though to pull his wife out of the tub.

"No, no. Leave her." I had seen enough other accidents in the hotel to remember the correct procedure. "Just turn off the water."

A call to the desk filled the room quickly—the hotel manager, the hotel security officer, two patrolmen, followed almost immediately by Detective Dan Cross, an old friend.

The manager, Russ Clark, suggested that I wait in the bedroom. Absently I began to repack Mrs. Roberts' purchases just to be doing something. Suddenly my

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shocked mind began to function again.

At the door I caught Dan's attention and motioned urgently to him.

When he joined me in the bedroom I couldn't control my excitement.

"Dan," I exclaimed, "Roberts murdered his wife."

My explanation took only a few seconds, and Dan listened carefully.

When I had finished, Dan thought aloud, "He's a big enough man to have done it—he could have held her underwater easily. But there won't be any evidence if he was nude when he did it."

"He was already beginning to undress before I left," I remembered, "and I heard him shouting at Mrs. Roberts just before I closed the door. If he hadn't planned to kill her—if it wasn't premeditated—there must be some wet clothes here.

"Dan," I went on, "do you know where most people in hotel rooms keep their dirty clothes? In a bottom dresser drawer."

Swiftly Dan approached one dresser, then the other. When he turned he was holding a man's undershirt and shorts.

"Wet," he announced.

When Roberts had been taken away, only Dan, Russ, and I remained.

"You have a good gal here, Russ," Dan said to the manager. "Roberts' clothes would have dried, and there would have been no evidence if Laurie hadn't caught on immediately that it was murder."

"How did you know it was murder," Russ asked.

Dan nodded to me. "Tell him, Laurie."

"When I was putting Mrs. Roberts' things back in the boxes I noticed that her new brown wig wasn't there. She had it on. And no woman," I explained simply, "would take a bath wearing a new wig."

And no man who loved his wife, I thought sadly, would pay so little attention to her that he didn't even know she was wearing a new wig.

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NERO WOLFE DEVISES A STRATAGEM

by REX STOUT

(Continued from page 47)

NEW YORK CAN HAVE PLEASANT summer evenings when it wants to, and that was one of them—warm but not hot and not muggy. I paid the taxi driver when he rolled to the curb at the address on Fifty-first Street east of Lexington, got out, and took a look. In bright sunshine the old gray-brick building would probably show signs of wear and tear, but now in twilight it wasn't too bad. Entering the vestibule I scanned the tier of names on the wall panel. The one next to the top said Devlin—Berk. I pushed the button, shoved the door open when the click came, went in, glanced around for an elevator, saw none, and started to climb stairs. Three flights up a door stood open, and there waiting was Della Devlin.

I told her hello, friendly but not profuse. She nodded, not so friendly, hugged the wall to let me pass, shut the door, and went by me to lead the way through an arch into a living room. I sent my eyes around with an expression of comradely interest. The chairs and couch were attractive and cool in summer slips. There were shelves of books. The windows were on the street and there were three doors besides the arch, two of them standing open and one not quite closed.

She sat and invited me to. "I can't imagine," she said in a louder voice than seemed necessary, in spite of the street noises from the open windows, "what you want to ask me that's so mysterious."

Sitting, I regarded her. Only one corner lamp was on and in the dim light she wasn't at all bad-looking. With smaller ears she would have been a worthy specimen, with no glare on her.

"It's not mysterious," I protested. "As I said on the phone it's private and confidential, that's all. Mr. Wolfe felt it would be an imposition to ask you to come to his office again, so he sent me. Miss Berk is out, is she?"

"Yes, she went to a show with a friend. *Guys and Dolls*."

"Fine. It's a good show. This really is confidential, Miss Devlin. So we're alone?"

"Certainly we are. What is it?"

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There were three things wrong. First, I had a hunch, and my batting average on hunches is high. Second, she was talking too loud. Third, her telling me where Carol Berk was, even naming the show, was offkey.

"The reason it's so confidential," I said, "is simply that you ought to decide for yourself what you want to do. I doubt if you realize what lengths other people may go to help you decide. You say we're alone, but it wouldn't surprise me a bit—"

I sprang up, marched across to the door that wasn't quite closed, thinking it the most likely, and jerked it open. Behind me a little smothered shriek came from Della Devlin. In front of me, backed up against closet shelves piled with cartons and miscellany, was Carol Berk. One look at her satisfied me on one point—what her eyes were like when something happened that really aroused her.

I stepped back. Della Devlin was at my elbow, jabbering. I gripped her arm hard enough to hurt a little and addressed Carol Berk as she emerged from the closet. "My God, do I look like that big a sap? Maybe your sidewise glance isn't as keen as you think—"

Della was yapping at me. "You get out! Get out!"

Carol stopped her. "Let him stay, Della." She was calm and contemptuous. "He's only a crummy little stooge, trying to slip one over for his boss. I'll be back in an hour or so."

She moved. Della, protesting, caught her arm, but Carol pulled loose and left through one of the open doors. There were sounds in the adjoining room, then she appeared again with a thing on her head and a jacket and handbag, and passed through to the foyer. The outer door opened and then closed. I crossed to a window, stuck my head out, and in a minute saw her emerge to the sidewalk and turn west.

I went back to my chair and sat. The open closet door was unsightly, and I got up and closed it and then sat again. "Just forget it," I said cheerfully. "The closet was a bum idea anyhow; she would have stifled in there. Sit down and relax while I try and slip one over for my boss."

She stood. "I'm not interested in anything you have to say."

"Then you shouldn't have let me in. Certainly you shouldn't have stuck Miss Berk in that closet. Let's get it over with. I merely want to find out whether you have any use for ten thousand dollars."

She gawked. "Whether I what?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

She went to a chair and sat, and I shifted position to be more comfortable facing her. "First, I want to tell you a couple of things about murder investigations."

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"I've heard all I want to about murder."

"I know you have, but that's one of the things. When you get involved in one it's not a question of what or how much you want to hear. That's the one question nobody asks you. Until and unless the Rackell case is solved, with the answers all in, you'll be hearing about it the rest of your life. Face it, Miss Devlin."

She didn't say anything.

"The other thing about murder investigations. Someone gets murdered and the cops go to work on it. Everybody that might possibly have a piece of useful information gets questioned. Say they question fifty different people. How many of the fifty answer every question truthfully? Maybe ten, maybe only four or five. Ask any experienced homicide man. They know it and they expect it, and that's why, when they think it's worth it, they go over the same questions with the same person again and again, after the truth. They often get it that way and they nearly always do with people who have cooked up a story, something they did or saw, with details. Of course you're not one of those. You haven't cooked up a detailed story. You have only answered a simple question 'No' instead of 'Yes.' They can't catch you—"

"What question? What do you mean?"

"I'm coming to it. I want—"

"Do you mean I lied? About what?"

I shook my head, not to call her a liar. "Wait till I get to it. You would of course show shocked surprise if I made the flat statement that Fifi Goheen murdered Arthur Rackell by changing a capsule at the restaurant that evening and that you saw her do it. Naturally you would, since the police have asked you if you saw anyone perform that action or any part of it and you have answered no. Wouldn't you?"

She was frowning, concentrated. Her hands were clasped. "But you—you haven't made any such statement."

"Right. I'd rather put it another way. Nero Wolfe has his own way of investigating and his own way of reaching conclusions. He has concluded that if he sends me to see you, to ask you to tell the police that you saw Fifi Goheen substituting a capsule it will serve the interest of truth and justice. So he sent me and I'm asking you. It will be embarrassing for you, but not so bad. As I explained, it won't be the first time they've had somebody suddenly remembering something. You can say you and Miss Goheen have been friends and you hated to come out with it, but now you see you have to. You can even say I came here and persuaded you to speak, if you

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want to, but you certainly shouldn't mention the ten thousand dollars. That—"

"What ten thousand dollars?"

"I'm telling you. Mr. Wolfe has also concluded that it would not be reasonable to expect you to undergo such embarrassment without some consideration. He has made a suggestion to Mr. and Mrs. Rackell, and they have agreed to provide a certain sum of money. Ten thousand of it will come to you, in appreciation of your cooperation in the cause of justice. It will be given you in cash, in currency, within forty-eight hours after you have done your part—and we'll have to discuss that, exactly what you'll tell the police. Speaking for Nero Wolfe, I guarantee the payment within forty-eight hours, or, if you want to, come down to his office with me now and he'll guarantee it himself. Don't ask me what it was that made him conclude that Fifi Goheen did it and that you saw her, because I don't know. Anyhow, if he's right, and he usually is, she'll only be getting what she deserves. You know that's true."

I stopped. She sat motionless, staring at me. There wasn't much light, and I couldn't tell anything from her eyes, but they looked absolutely blank. As the seconds grew to a minute I began to think I had literally stupefied her, and I gave her a nudge.

"Have I made it plain?"

"Yes," she mumbled, "you've made it plain."

Suddenly a shudder ran over her whole body, her head dropped forward, and her hands lifted to cover her face, her elbows on her knees. The shudder quit and she froze like that. She held it so long that I decided another nudge was required, but before I got it out she straightened up and demanded, "What made you think I would do such a thing?"

"I don't think. Mr. Wolfe does the thinking. I'm just a crummy little stooge."

"You'd better go. Please go!"

I stood up and I hesitated. My feeling was that I had run through it smooth as silk, as instructed, but at that point I wasn't sure. Should I make a play of trying to crowd her into a yes or no, or leave it hanging? I couldn't stand there forever, debating it with her staring at me, so I told her, "I do think it's a good offer. The number's in the phone book."

She had nothing to tell my back as I walked to the foyer. I let myself out, descended the three flights, walked to Lexington, found a phone booth in a drugstore, and dialed the number I knew best. In a moment Wolfe's voice was in my ear.

"Okay," I said. "I'm in a booth. I just left her."

"In what mind?"

"I'm not sure. She had Carol

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Berk hid in a closet. After that had been attended to and we were alone I followed the script, and she was impressed. I'm so good at explaining things that she didn't have to ask questions. The light wasn't very good, but as far as I could tell the prospect of collecting ten grand wasn't absolutely repulsive to her, and neither was the idea of flipping Miss Goheen into the soup. She was torn. She told me to go, and I thought it wise to oblige. When I left she was in a clinch with herself."

"What is she going to do?"

"Don't quote me. But I told her we'd have to discuss exactly what she would tell the cops, so we'll hear from her if she decides to play. Do you want my guesses?"

"Yes."

"Well. On her spilling it to the cops, the one thing that would spoil it, forty to one against. That isn't how her mind will work. On her deciding to play ball with us, twenty to one against. She's not tough enough. On her just keeping it to herself, fifteen to one against. On general principles. On her telling Miss Goheen, ten to one against. She hates her too much. On telling Carol Berk, two to one against, but I wouldn't dig deep on that one either way. On her telling Mr. H, even money, no matter who is a Commie and who isn't. It would show him how fine and big-hearted and noble she is. She could be, at that. It has been done. Is Saul there?"

"Yes. I never spent anybody's money, not even my own, on a slimmer chance."

"Especially your own. And incidentally sticking my neck out. You don't know the meaning of fear when it comes to sticking my neck out. Do we proceed?"

"What alternative is there?"

"None. Has Saul got his men there?"

"Yes."

"Tell him to step on it and meet me at the northeast corner of Sixty-ninth and Fifth Avenue. She could be phoning Heath right now."

"Very well. Then you'll come home?"

I said I would, hung up, and got out of the oven. Nothing would have been more appreciated right then than a large coke-and-lime with the ice brushing my lips, but it was possible that Della was already phoning him and he was at home to get the call, so I marched on by the fountain and out. A taxi got me to the corner of Sixty-ninth and Fifth in six minutes. My watch said 9:42.

I strolled east on Sixty-ninth and stopped across the street from the canopied entrance of the towering tenement of which Henry Jameson Heath was a tenant. It was no casing problem for me, since Saul Panzer had been there

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in the afternoon to make a survey and spot foxholes. That was elaborate but desirable, because it was to be a very fancy tail, using three shifts of three men each, with Saul in charge of one, Fred Durkin of the second, and Orrie Cather of the third. Fifteen skins an hour that setup would cost, which was quite a disbursement on what Wolfe had admitted was a one-in-twenty chance. Seeing no one but a uniformed doorman in evidence around the canopy I moseyed back to the corner.

A taxi pulled up and three men got out. Two of them were just men whose names I knew and with whose records I was fairly familiar, but the third was Saul Panzer, the one guy I want within hearing the day I get hung on the face of a cliff with jet eagles zooming at me. With his saggy shoulders and his face all nose, he looks one-fifth as strong and hardy, and one-tenth as smart, as he really is. I shook hands with him, not having seen him for a week or so, and nodded to the other two.

"Is there anything to say?" I asked him.

"I don't think so. Mr. Wolfe filled me in."

"Okay, take it. You know the Homicide boys may be on him too?"

"Sure. We'll try not to trip on 'em."

"You know it's a long shot and the only bet we've got? So lose him quick, what do we care."

"We'll lose him or die."

"That's the spirit. That's what puts statues of private detectives in the park. See you on the witness stand."

I left them. My immediate and urgent objective was Madison Avenue for a coke-and-lime, but I went a block north to Seventieth Street. Sixty-ninth Street now belonged to Saul and his squad.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, Friday, I sat in the office listening to the clank of Wolfe's elevator as it brought him down from the plant rooms.

There had been no cheep from Della Devlin, but we hadn't wanted one anyway. What we wanted we had got—at least, the first installment. At 12:42 Thursday night Saul had phoned that Heath had checked in at Sixty-ninth Street, arriving in a taxi, alone. That was all for the night. At 6:20 in the morning he had phoned that Fred Durkin and his two men had taken over and had been briefed on the terrain. And at 10:23 Fred had phoned that Heath had left his tenement and taken a taxi to 719 East Fifty-first Street and entered the building. That was the gray-brick house I had visited the day before. Fred said they had seen no sign of an official tail. They were

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deployed. I told him he was my favorite mick and still would be if he hung on, and buzzed Wolfe in the plant rooms to inform him.

Wolfe entered, got at his desk, looked over the morning mail, signed a couple of checks, dictated a letter of inquiry about sausage to a man in Wisconsin, and settled down with the crossword puzzle in the London *Times*. I carried on my routine neatly and normally, making it perfectly plain that I could be just as placid as him, no matter how tense and ticklish it got. I had just finished typing the envelope for the letter and was twirling it out of the machine when the doorbell rang. I went to the hall to answer it, took one look through the one-way glass panel, wheeled and returned to the office, and spoke.

"I guess I'm through as a bookie. I said forty to one she wouldn't spill it. Wengert and Cramer want in. We can sneak out the back way and head for Mexico."

He finished putting in a letter, with precision, before he looked up. "Is this flummery?"

"No, sir. It's them."

"Indeed." His brows went up a trifle. "Bring them in."

I went out and to the door, turned the knob, and pulled it open. "Hello hello," I said brightly. "Mr. Wolfe was saying only a minute ago that he would like to see Mr. Cramer and Mr. Wengert, and here you are."

Bright as it was, it didn't go over so well because they stepped in with the first hello and were well along the hall by the time I finished. I shut the door and followed. Entering the office it struck me as encouraging that Wengert and Wolfe were shaking hands, but then I remembered the District Attorney who always shook hands with the defendant before he opened up, to show there was no personal feeling. Cramer usually took the red leather chair at the end of Wolfe's desk, but this time he let Wengert have it, and I moved up one of the yellow ones for him.

"I sent you my regards the other day by Goodwin," Wengert said. "I hope he remembered."

Wolfe inclined his head. "He did. Thank you."

"I didn't know then I'd be seeing you so soon."

"Nor did I."

"No, I suppose not." Wengert crossed his legs and leaned back. "Goodwin said you had taken on a job for Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Rackell."

"That's right." Wolfe was casual. "To investigate the death of their nephew. They said he had been working for the FBI. It would have been impolite to wander into your line of fire, so I sent Mr. Goodwin to see you."

"Let's cut the blah. You sent him to get information."

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Wolfe shrugged. "Confronted with omniscience I bow. My motives are often obscure to myself, but you know all about them. Your advantage. If that was his errand he failed. You told him nothing."

"Right. Our files are for us, not for private operators. My coming here tells you that we've got a hand in this case, but that's not for publication. If you didn't want to get into our line of fire you certainly stumbled. But officially it's a Manhattan homicide, so I'm here to listen." He nodded at Cramer. "Go ahead."

Cramer had been holding in with difficulty. Holding in is a chronic problem with him, and it shows in various ways, chiefly by his big red face getting redder, with the color spreading lower on his thick muscular neck. He blurted at Wolfe, "Honest to God, I'm surprised! Not at Goodwin so much, but you! Subornation of perjury. Attempting to bribe a witness to give false testimony. I've known you to take some fat risks, but holy saints, this ain't risking it, it's yelling for it!"

Wolfe was frowning. "Are you saying that Mr. Goodwin and I have suborned perjury?"

"You've tried to!"

"Good heavens, that's a serious charge. You must have warrants. Serve them, by all means."

"Just give it to him, Inspector," Wengert advised.

Cramer's head jerked to me. "Did you go last evening to the apartment of Della Devlin on Fifty-first Street?"

"It's hotter than yesterday," I stated.

"I asked you a question!"

"This is infantile," Wolfe told him. "You must know the legal procedure with suspected felons. We do."

"Just give it to him," Wengert repeated.

Cramer was glaring at Wolfe. "What you know about legal procedures. Okay. Yesterday you sent Goodwin to see Della Devlin. In your name he offered her ten thousand dollars to testify that she saw Fifi Goheen take the pillbox from the table, remove the capsule, replace it with another, and put the box back on the table. He said the money would be supplied by Mr. and Mrs. Rackell and would be handed her in currency after she had so testified. I shouldn't have said subornation of perjury, I should have said attempt. Now do I ask Goodwin some questions?"

"I'd like to ask him one myself." Wolfe's eyes moved. "Archie. Is what Mr. Cramer just said true?"

"No, sir."

"Then don't answer questions. A policeman has no right to make an inaccurate statement to a citizen about his actions and then order him to answer questions

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about it." He went to Cramer. "We could drag this out interminably. Why not resolve it sensibly and conclusively?" He came to me. "Archie, get Miss Devlin on the phone and ask her to come down here at once."

I turned and started to dial.

"Cut it, Goodwin," Wengert snapped. I went on dialing. Cramer, who can move when he wants to, left his chair and was by me, pushing down the button. I cocked my head to look up at him. He scowled down at me. I put it back in the cradle. He returned to his chair.

"Then we'll have to change the subject," Wolfe said dryly. "Surely your position is untenable. You want to bullyrag us for what Mr. Goodwin, as my agent, said to Miss Devlin; the first thing to establish is what was actually said; and the only satisfactory way to establish it is to have them both here. Yet you not only didn't bring her with you, you are even determined that we shall not communicate with her. Obviously you don't want her to know what's going on. It's quite preposterous, but I draw no conclusion. It's hard to believe that the New York police and the FBI would conspire to bamboozle a citizen, even me."

Cramer was reddening again.

Wengert cleared his throat. "Look, Wolfe," he said, "we're here to talk sense."

"Good. Why not start?"

"I am. The interest of the people and government of the United States is involved in this case. My job is to protect that interest. I know you and Goodwin can keep your mouths shut when you want to. I am now talking off the record. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Goodwin?"

"Good here."

"See that you keep it good. Arthur Rackell told his aunt that he was working with the FBI. That was a lie. He was either a member of the Communist party or a fellow traveler, we're not sure which. We don't know who he told, besides his aunt, that he was with the FBI, but we're working on it and so are the police. He may have been killed by a Communist who heard it somehow and believed it. There were other motives, personal ones, but the Communist angle comes first until and unless it's ruled out. So you can see why we're in on it. The public interest is involved, not only of this city and state but the whole country. You see that?"

"I saw it," Wolfe muttered, "when I sent Mr. Goodwin to see you day before yesterday."

"We'll skip that." Wengert didn't want to offend. "The point is, what about you? I concede that all you're after is to catch the murderer and collect a fee. But

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we know you sent Goodwin to Miss Devlin yesterday to offer to pay her to say that she saw Miss Goheen in the act. We also know that you are not likely to pull such a stunt just for the hell of it. You knew exactly what you were doing and why you were doing it. You say you have regard for the public interest. All right, the Inspector here represents it, and so do I, and we want you to open up for us. We confidently expect you to. What and whom are you after, and where does that stunt get you?"

Wolfe was regarding him sympathetically through half-closed eyes. "You're not a nincompoop, Mr. Wengert." The eyes moved. "Nor you, Mr. Cramer."

"That's something," Cramer growled.

"It is indeed, considering the average. But your coming here to put this to me, either peremptorily or politely, was ill considered. Shall I explain?"

"If it's not too much bother."

"I'll be as brief as possible. Let us make a complex supposition—that I got Mr. and Mrs. Rackell's permission for an extraordinary disbursement for a stated purpose; that I sent Mr. Goodwin to see Miss Devlin; that he told her I had concluded that Miss Goheen had murdered Arthur Rackell and she had seen the act; that I suggested that she should inform the police of the fact; and that, as compensation for her embarrassment and distress, I engaged to pay her a large sum of money which would be provided by Mr. and Mrs. Rackell."

Wolfe upturned a palm. "Supposing I did that, it was not an attempt to suborn perjury, since it cannot be shown that I intended her to swear falsely, but certainly I was exposing myself to a claim for damages from Miss Goheen. That was a calculated risk I had to take, and whether the calculation was sound depended on the event. There was also a risk of being charged with obstruction of justice, and that too depended on the event. Should it prove to serve justice instead of obstructing it, and should Miss Goheen suffer no unmerited damage, I would be fully justified. I hope to be. I expect to be."

"Then you can—"

"If you please. But suppose, having done all that, I now admit it to you and tell you my calculations and intentions. Then you'll either have to try to head me off or be in it with me. It would be jackassery for you to head me off—take my word for it; it would be unthinkable. But it would also be unthinkable for you to be in it, either actively or passively. Whatever the outcome may be, you cannot afford to be associated with an offer to pay a large sum of money

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to a person involved in a murder case for disclosing a fact, even an authentic one. Your positions forbid it. I'm a private citizen and can stand it; you can't. What the devil did you come here for? If I'm headed for defeat, opprobrium and punishment, then I am. Why dash up here only to get yourselves confronted with unthinkable alternatives?"

Wolfe fluttered a hand. "Luckily this is just talk. I was merely discussing a complex supposition. To return to reality I will be glad to give you gentlemen any information that you may properly require—and Mr. Goodwin too, of course. So?"

They looked at each other. Cramer let out a snort. Wengert pulled at his ear and gazed at me, and I returned the gaze, open-faced and perfectly innocent. He found that not helpful and transferred to Wolfe.

"You called the turn," he said, "when you told Goodwin to phone Miss Devlin. I should have foreseen that. That was dumb."

The phone rang and I swiveled and got it. "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is Rattner."

"Oh, hello. Keep it down, my ears are sensitive."

"Durkin sent me to phone so he could stay on the subject. The subject came out of the house at seven nineteen East Fifty-first Street at eleven forty-one. He was alone. He walked to Lexington and around the corner to a drug store and is in there now in a phone booth. I'm across the street in a restaurant. Any instructions?"

"Not a thing, thank you. Give my love to the family."

"Right."

It clicked off, and I hung up and swiveled back to rejoin the party, but apparently it was over. They were on their feet, and Wengert was turning to go. Cramer was saying, "... but it's not *all* off the record. I just want that understood."

He turned and followed Wengert out. I saw no point in dashing past them to the door, since two grown men should be up to turning a knob and pulling, but I stepped to the hall to observe. When they were outside and the door closed I went back in and remarked to Wolfe, "Very neat. But what if they had let me phone her?"

He made a face. "Pfui. If they had got it from her they wouldn't have called on me. They would have sent for you, possibly with a warrant. That was one of the contingencies."

"They might have let me phone her anyway."

"Unlikely, since that would have disclosed their knowledge—to her and therefore to anyone—and betrayed their informant. But if they had, while she was on her way I would have

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proceeded with them, and they would have left before she arrived."

I put the yellow chair back in place. "All the same I'm glad they didn't and so are you. That was Rattner on the phone, reporting for Fred. Heath was with Miss Devlin an hour and four minutes. He left at eleven forty-one and was in a phone booth in a drug store when Rattner called."

"Satisfactory." He picked up his pencil and bent over the crossword puzzle with a little sigh.

June twenty-first is supposed to be the longest day, but this year it was August third. It went on for weeks after Cramer and Wengert left. I spent it all in the office, and it was no fun. There was only one thing that could keep us floating, but there were a dozen that could sink us. They might lose him. Or he might handle it by phone—most unlikely, but not impossible. Or Wolfe might have it figured entirely wrong; he himself gave it one in twenty. Or Heath might meet him or her some place where they couldn't be nailed. Or a city or federal employee might horn in and ruin it. Or and or and or.

Five bucks an hour had been added to the outgo. If and when the call came that would start me moving I didn't want to waste any precious minutes or even seconds finding transportation, so Herb Aronson had his taxi parked at the filling station at the corner of Eleventh Avenue, Also he came to us for lunch and again, at seven in the evening, for dinner.

Every time the phone rang and I grabbed it, I wanted it and I didn't. It might be the starting gun, but on the other hand it might be the awful news that they had lost him. Keeping a tail on a guy in New York, especially if he has an important reason for wanting privacy, needs not only great skill but also plenty of luck. We were buying the skill, in Saul and Fred and Orrie, but you can't buy luck.

The luck held, and so did they. There were two more calls from Fred, via Rattner, before two o'clock, when he was relieved by Orrie Cather. One was to report that Heath, after calls at an optician's and a bookstore, had entered a restaurant on Forty-fifth Street and was lunching with two men, not known to me as described, and the other was to tell where Orrie could find him. There was still no sign of an official tail. During the afternoon and early evening there was a series of reports from Orrie. Heath and his companions left the restaurant at 2:52, taxied to the apartment house on Sixty-ninth Street where Heath lived, and entered. At 5:35 the two men emerged and walked off. At 7:03 Heath came out and took a taxi to Chezar's restaurant,

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where he met Della Devlin and they dined. At 9:14 they left and taxied to the gray-brick house on Fifty-first Street and went in. Heath was still in there at ten o'clock, the hour for Orrie to be relieved by Saul Panzer, and it was at the corner of Fifty-first and Lexington that Orrie and Saul connected.

By that time I would have been chewing on a railroad spike if I had had one, and Wolfe was working hard trying to be serene. Between nine-thirty and ten-thirty he made four trips to the bookshelves, trying different ones, setting a record.

I snarled at him, "What's the matter, restless?"

"Yes," he said placidly. "Are you?"

"Yes."

It came a little before eleven. The phone rang, and I got it. It was Bill Doyle.

He seemed to be panting. "I'm out of breath," he said, wasting some of it. "When he left there he got smart and started tricks. We let him spot Al and ditch him, you know how Saul works it, but even then we damn near lost him. He came to Eighty-sixth and Fifth and went in the park on foot. A woman was sitting on a bench with a collie on a leash, and he stopped and started talking to her. Saul thinks you'd better come."

"So do I. Describe the woman."

"I can't. I was keeping back and didn't get close enough."

"Where is Saul?"

"On the ground under a bush."

"Where are you?"

"Drugstore. Eighty-sixth and Madison."

"Be at the Eighty-sixth-Street park entrance. I'm coming."

I whirled and told Wolfe, "In Central Park. He met a woman with a dog. So long."

"Are you armed?"

"Certainly." I was at the door.

"They will be desperate."

"I already am."

I let myself out, ran down the stoop and to the corner. Herb was in his hack, listening to the radio. At sight of me on the lope he switched it off and by the time I was in he had the engine started. I told him, "Eighty-sixth and Fifth," and we rolled.

We went up Eleventh Avenue instead of Tenth because with the staggered lights on Tenth you can't average better than twenty-five. On Eleventh you can make twelve or more blocks on a light if you sprint, and we sprinted. At Fifty-sixth we turned east, had fair luck crosstown, and turned left on Fifth Avenue. I told Herb to quit crawling and he told me to get out and walk. When we reached Eighty-sixth Street I had the door open before the wheels stopped, hopped out, and crossed the avenue to the park side.

Bill Doyle was there. He was

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the pale gaunt type, from reading too much about horses and believing it. I asked him, "Anything new?"

"No. I been here waiting."

"Can you show me Saul's bush without rousing the dog?"

"I can if he's still there. It's quite a ways."

"Within a hundred yards of them take to the grass. They mustn't hear our footsteps stopping. Let's go."

He entered the park by the paved path and I trailed. The first thirty paces were upgrade, curving right. Under a park light two young couples had stopped to have an argument, and we detoured around them. The path leveled and straightened under overhanging branches of trees. We passed another light. A man swinging a cane came striding from the opposite direction and on by. The path turned left, crossed an open space, and entered shrubbery. A little father on there was a fork and Doyle stopped.

"They're down there a couple of hundred feet," he whispered, pointing to the left branch of the fork. "Or they were. Saul's over that way."

"Okay, I'll lead. Steer me by touch."

I stepped onto the grass and started alongside the right branch of the fork. It was uphill a little and I had to duck under branches. I hadn't gone far when Doyle tugged at my sleeve, and when I turned he pointed to the left. "That bunch of bushes there," he whispered. "The big one in the middle. That's where he went, but I can't see him."

My sight is twenty-twenty and my eyes had got adjusted to the night, but for a minute I couldn't pick him up. When I did the huddled hump under the bush was perfectly plain. A ripple ran up my spine. Since Saul was still there, Heath was still there too, under his eye, and almost certainly the woman with the dog was there also. Of course I couldn't see them, on account of the bushes. I considered what to do. I wanted to confront them together, before they separated, but if Saul was close enough to hear their words I didn't want to bust it up. The most attractive idea was to sneak across to Saul's bush and join him, but I might be heard, if not by them by the dog.

Standing there, peering toward Saul's bush, concentrated, with Doyle beside me, I became aware of footsteps behind me, approaching along the path, but supposed it was a late park stroller and didn't turn—until the footsteps stopped and a voice came.

"Looking for tigers?"

I wheeled. It was a flatfoot on park patrol. "Good evening, officer," I said respectfully. "Nope, just getting air."

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"The air's the same if you stay on the path." He approached on the grass, looking not at us but past us, in the direction we had been gazing. Suddenly he grunted, quickened his step, and headed straight for Saul's bush. Apparently he had good eyes too. There was no time to consider. I muttered fast at Doyle's ear, "Grab his cap and run—jump, damn it!"

He did. I will always love him for it, especially for not hesitating a tenth of a second. Four leaps got him to the cop, a swoop of his hand got his cap, and away he scooted, swerving right to double back to the path. I stood in my tracks. The cop acted by reflex. Instead of ignoring the playful prank and proceeding to inspect the object under the bush, or making for me, he bounded for Doyle, and his cap, calling a command to halt. Doyle, reaching the path and streaking along it, had a good lead, but the cop was no snail. They disappeared.

All that commotion changed the situation entirely. I made it double quick to the left across the grass until I reached the other fork of the path, and kept going. Around a bend, there they were—Heath seated on a bench with a woman, a big collie lying at their feet. When I stopped in front of them the collie rose to its haunches and made a noise, asking a question. I had a hand in a coat pocket.

"Tell the dog it's okay," I suggested. "I hate to shoot a dog."

"Why should you—" Heath started, and stopped. He stood up.

"Yeah, it's me," I said. "Representing Nero Wolfe. It won't help if you scream, there's two of us. Come on out, Saul. Watch the dog, it may not wait for orders."

There was a sound from the direction of the bushes, and in a moment Saul appeared, circling to join me on the right. The dog made a noise that was more of a whine than a growl, but it didn't move. The woman put a hand on its head. I asked Saul, "Could you hear what they said?"

"Most of it. I heard enough."

"Was it interesting?"

"Yes."

"This is illegal," Heath stated. He was half choked with indignation or something. "This is an invasion—"

"Nuts. Save it; you may need it. I have a cab parked at the Eighty-sixth Street entrance. Four of us with the dog will just fill it comfortably. Mr. Wolfe is expecting us. Let's go."

"You're armed," Heath said. "This is assault with a deadly weapon."

"I'm going home," the woman said, speaking for the first time. "I'll telephone Mr. Wolfe and we'll see about this. I brought my

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dog to the park, and this gentleman and I happened to get into conversation. This is outrageous. You won't dare to harm my dog."

She got up, and the collie was instantly erect by her, against her knee.

"Well," I conceded, "I admit I hate to shoot a dog. I also admit that Mr. Wolfe likes himself so well that he'll steal the throne on the Day of Judgment if they don't watch him. So you go on home with Towser, and Saul and I will call on the police and the FBI, and I'll tell them what I saw, and Saul will tell them what he saw and heard. But don't make the mistake of thinking you can talk them out of believing us. We have our reputations just as you have yours."

They looked at each other. They looked at me and back at each other.

"We'll see Mr. Wolfe," the woman said.

Heath looked right and then left, as if hoping there might be someone else around to see, and then nodded at her.

"That's sensible," I told them. "You lead the way, Saul. Eighty-sixth-Street entrance."

We left the collie in Herb's taxi, parked at the curb in front of Wolfe's place. There has never been a dog in that house, and I saw no point in breaking the precedent for one that was on such strained terms with me. Herb, on advice, closed the glass panels.

I went ahead up the stoop to open the door and let them in, put them in the front room with Saul, and went through to the office.

"Okay," I told Wolfe, "it's your turn. They're here."

Behind his desk he closed the book he had been reading and put it down. He asked, "Mrs. Rackell?"

"Yes. They were there on a bench, with dog, and Saul was behind a bush and could hear, but I don't know what. I gave them their choice of the law or you, and they preferred you. She probably thinks she can buy out. You want Saul first?"

"No. Bring them in."

"But Saul can tell you—"

"I don't need it. Or if I do—we'll see."

"You want him too?"

"Yes."

I went and opened the connecting door, invited them, and they entered. As Mrs. Rackell crossed to the red leather chair and sat, her lips were so tight there were none. Heath's face had no expression at all, but it must be hard to display feeling with that kind of round pudgy frontispiece even if you try. Saul took a chair against the far wall, but Wolfe told him to move up, and he transferred to one at the end of my desk.

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Mrs. Rackell grabbed the ball. She said it was absolutely contemptible, spying on her and threatening her with the police. It was infamous and treacherous. She wouldn't tolerate it.

Wolfe let her get it out and then said dryly, "You astonish me, madam." He shook his head. "You chatter about proprieties when you are under the menace of a mortal peril. Don't you realize what I've done? Don't you know where we stand?"

"You're chattering yourself," Heath said harshly. "We were brought here under a threat. By what right?"

"I'll tell you." Wolfe leaned back. "This is no pleasure for me, so I'll hurry it—my part of it. But you need to know exactly what the situation is, for you have a vital decision to make. First let me introduce Mr. Saul Panzer." His eyes moved. "Saul, you followed Mr. Heath to a clandestine meeting with Mrs. Rackell?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll risk an assumption. I assume that his purpose was to protest against her supplying funds to inculpate Miss Goheen and to demand that the attempt be abandoned. You heard what they said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did it impeach my assumption?"

"No, sir."

"Did it support it?"

"Yes, sir. Plenty."

Wolfe went to Heath. "Mr. Panzer's quality is known, though not to you until now. I think a jury will believe him and I'm sure the police and the FBI will. My advice, sir, is to cut the loss."

"Loss?" Heath was trying to sneer but with that face he couldn't make it. "I haven't lost anything."

"You're about to. You can't help it." Wolfe wiggled a finger at him. "Must I spell it out for you? Wednesday evening, day before yesterday, when you and six others were here, I was nonplused. I had my choice of giving up or of attempting simultaneously a dozen elaborate lines of inquiry, any one of which would have strained my resources. Neither was tolerable. Since I was helpless with what had already happened, I had to try to make something happen under my eye, and I devised a stratagem—a clumsy one, but the best I could do. I made a proposal to Mr. and Mrs. Rackell. I phrased it with care, but in effect I asked for money to bribe a witness and solve the case by chicanery."

Wolfe's eyes darted to Mrs. Rackell. "And you idiotically exposed yourself."

"I did?" She was contemptuous. "How?"

"You grabbed at it. Your husband, in his innocence, was

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dubious, but not you. You thought that, having decided the job was beyond me, I was trying to earn a fee by knavery, and you eagerly acquiesced. Why? It was out of character, and indeed preposterous. What you had said you wanted was the murderer of your nephew caught and punished, but apparently you were willing to spend a large sum of money, your own money if necessary, on a frame-up. Either that or you were excessively naive, and at least it justified speculation."

His gaze was straight at her and she was meeting it. He went on, "So I speculated. What if you had yourself killed your nephew? As for getting the poison, that was as feasible for you as for the others. As for opportunity, you said you had not entered you nephew's room after Mrs. Kremp had been there and put the capsules in the pillbox, but could you prove it? There was nothing to my knowledge that excluded you. Your harassment of the FBI and the police could have been for assurance that you were safe. It was your husband who insisted on coming to me, and naturally you would have wanted to be present. As for motive, that would have to be explored, but for speculation there was material at hand, furnished by you. You were positive, with no real evidence for it, that your nephew had been killed by a Communist who had discovered that he was betraying the cause; you got that in first thing when you called here Tuesday with your husband. Might it not be true and you yourself the Communist?"

"Rot!" She snorted.

Wolfe shook his head. "Not necessarily. I deplore the tendency to accuse people of pro-communism irresponsibly and unjustly, but anybody could be one secretly, no matter what facade he presented. There was the question, if you were in fact a Communist or a sympathizer, why did you so badger your nephew that he had to pacify you by telling the lie that he was working for the FBI? Why didn't you confide in him your own devotion to the cause? Of course you didn't dare. There would have been the danger that some day he might recant, that he might have become an ex-Communist and told all he knew, as so many have done; and to preserve your facade for your husband and friends you had to keep after him. It must have been a severe shock when you learned, or thought you did, that he was an agent of Communism's implacable enemy. It made him an imminent threat, there in your own household."

Wolfe came forward in his chair. "That was all speculation two days ago, but not now. Your meeting with Mr. Heath has made it a confident assumption.

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Why should you make a secret rendezvous with him? What could give him the right to demand that you withdraw the offer of money for Miss Devlin? Well. If you are secretly a Communist, almost certainly you have contributed substantial sums of money—to the party of course, but also to the bail fund; and Mr. Heath is the trustee of the bail fund and is inviting a term in jail rather than disclose the names of the contributors. So, madam, my stratagem worked—with, I confess, a full share of luck. Mr. Goodwin and I have been under some strain. Until a few minutes ago, when he entered and told me you two were here, I wouldn't have wagered a nickel on it. Now it's over, thank heaven. My assumptions are on rock. You're cooked."

"You're a conceited fool," Mrs. Rackell said flatly. For the first time I thought she was really impressive. He hadn't made a dent in her. She was still dead-sure of herself. "With your crazy assumptions," she said. "I was resting on a park bench, and Mr. Heath came along and spoke." She darted a contemptuous glance at Saul. "Whatever lies that man tells about what he heard."

Wolfe nodded. "That of course is your best position, and no doubt you're capable of defending it against all assault, so I won't try butting it." He looked at Heath. "But yours is much weaker, and I don't see how you can hold it."

"I have withstood better men than you," Heath declared. "Men in positions of great power. Men who head the imperialist conspiracy to dominate the world."

"No doubt," Wolfe conceded. "But even if you appraise them correctly, which I question, right now you have to appraise me. I head no conspiracy to dominate anything, but I've got you in a hole you can't scramble out of. Must I spell it out for you? You're a trustee of that Communist bail fund, and at great personal risk you are determined to keep the names of the contributors secret. Court orders haven't budged you. Obviously you prefer any alternative to disclosure of the names. But you're going to disclose one of them to me now: Mrs. Benjamin Rackell. And the amounts and dates of her contributions. Well?"

"No comment."

"Pfui. I say you can't hold it. Consider what's going to happen. I am convinced that Mrs. Rackell murdered her nephew because she thought he was spying on Communists for the FBI, and therefore, of course, her own secret was in danger. The FBI and the police will now share that conviction. Whether it takes a day or a year, do you think there's a chance we won't get her?

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Knowing she had the poison, do you think we won't discover where and how she got it?"

Wolfe shook his head. "No. You'll have to ditch her. She's too hot to hold. The police will put it to you—have you any knowledge or evidence that she has been in sympathy with the Communist cause? You say no or refuse to answer. Subsequently they get such evidence, with proof easily possible that, through some process which you cannot avert they will get the whole list of contributors. And instead of a brief commitment for contempt of court you'll get a considerable term for withholding vital evidence in a murder case. Besides, what of the cause you're devoted to? You know the opinion of Communism held by most Americans, including me. To the odium already attached to it would you add the stigma of shielding a murderer?"

Wolfe raised his brows. "Really, Mr. Heath. There are plenty of precedents to guide you. This will be by no means the first time that an act of misguided zeal by a Communist has come home to roost. In the countries they rule the jails are full—let alone the graves—of former comrades who were indiscreet. In America, where you don't rule and I hope you never will, can you afford the luxury of shielding a murderer? No. She's too much for you. How much has she contributed and when?"

Heath's face was really something. If he hadn't inherited money he could have piled it up playing poker. From looking at him no one could have got the faintest notion how to bet.

He stood up. "I'll let you know tomorrow," he said.

Wolfe grunted. "Oh, no. I want to phone the police to come for her. They'll want a statement from you. Archie?"

I got up and moved and was between the company and the door. Heath moved too. "I'm going," he said, and came. When I stood pat he swerved to circle me. It would have been a pleasure to plug him, but I refrained and merely got his shoulder, whirled him, and propelled him a little. He stumbled but stayed upright.

"This is assault," he told Wolfe, not me. "And illegal restraint. You'll regret this."

"Bosh." Wolfe suddenly blew up. "Confound it, do you think I'm going to let you walk out to call a meeting of your Politburo? Do you think I don't know when I've got you hooked? You can't possibly hang onto her. Talk sense! Can you?"

"No," he said.

"Are you ready to disclose the facts?"

"Not to you. To the police, yes."

Mrs. Rackell snapped at him,

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"Have you gone mad, you fool?"

He stared at her. I've heard a lot of phony cracks in that office, of all kinds and shapes, but that one by Henry Jameson Heath took the cake. Staring at her, he said calmly, "I must do my duty as a citizen, Mrs. Rackell."

Wolfe spoke. "Archie, get Mr. Cramer."

I started to dial.

Saturday noon, the next day, Wengert and Cramer stood there in the office, at the end of Wolfe's desk. They were standing because, having been there nearly an hour and covered all the points, they were ready to leave. They had not admitted in so many words that Wolfe had done the American people, including them, a favor, but on the whole they had been sociable.

As they were turning to go I said, "Excuse me, one little thing."

They looked at me. I spoke to Wengert. "I thought Mr. Wolfe might mention it, but he didn't, and neither did you. I only bring it up to offer a constructive criticism. An FBI undercover girl, even one disguised as a Commie, shouldn't get in the habit of hurting people's feelings just for the hell of it. It didn't do a particle of good for Carol Berk to call me a crummy little stooge before a witness. Of course she was sore because I found her in the closet, but even so, I think you ought to speak to her about it."

Wengert was frowning at me. "Carol Berk? What kind of gag is this?"

"Oh, come off it." I was disgusted. "How thick could I get? It was so obvious that Mr. Wolfe didn't even bother to comment on it. Who else could have told you about my talk with Della Devlin? She trusted Miss Berk enough to let her hide in the closet, so of course she told her about it. Do you want to debate it with me on TV?"

"No. Nor with anybody else. You talk too damn much."

"Only with the right people. Say please, and I'll promise not to tell I just wanted to make a helpful suggestion. I may be crummy and I may be a stooge, but I'm not little."

Cramer snorted. "If you ask me there's too much of you. About a hundred and eighty pounds too much. Come on, Wengert, I'm late."

They went. I supposed that was the last of that, but a couple of days later, Monday afternoon, while Wolfe was dictating a letter, the phone rang and a voice said it was Carol Berk. I said hello, showing no enthusiasm, and asked her, "How are your manners?"

"Rotten when required," she said cheerfully. "Privately like this, from a phone booth, I can be charming. I thought it was only

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fair for me to apologize for calling you little."

"Okay, go ahead."

"I thought you might prefer it face to face. I'm willing to take the trouble if you insist."

"Well, I'll tell you. I had an idea last week, Wednesday I think it was, that I ought to find time some day to tell you why I don't like you. We could meet and clean it up. I'll tell you why I don't like you, and you'll apologize. The Churchill bar at four thirty? Can you be seen with me in public?"

"Certainly, I'm supposed to be seen in public."

"Fine. I'll have a hammer and sickle in my buttonhole."

As I hung up and swiveled I told Wolfe, "That was Carol Berk. I'm going to buy her a drink and possibly food. Since she was connected with the case we've just finished, of course I'll put it on the expense account."

"You will not," he asserted and resumed the dictation.

NEXT MONTH . . .

Discovery!

complete short novel by the creator of Charlie Chan—

EARL DERR BIGGERS' *The Dollar Chasers*

and 9 NEW stories — including

MICHAEL GILBERT'S *The Emergency Exit Affair*

NEDRA TYRE'S *The Murder Game*

GERALD KERSH'S *One Case in a Million*

ROBERT L. FISH'S *newest Schlock Homes*

EDWARD D. HOCH'S *newest Nick Velvet*

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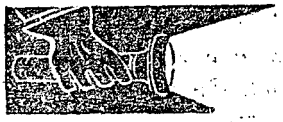

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by JOHN DICKSON CARR

The new year, let it be reported, already glows with promise. At least (praise be!) we have had no campaign against violence in published mysteries. On this occasion I can offer you three explosive novels and a book of admirable short stories. Should 1970 continue as it has begun, there will be scant need to fall back on Father Brown, Joseph Rouletabille, or Uncle Abner.

The Brass Go-Between, by Oliver Bleeck (Morrow, $5.95) packs T.N.T. in both fists; don't underate its author as a mere Fancy Dan. After some dazzling footwork in early rounds, feinting as well as jabbing with his left, Mr. Bleeck—who's really somebody else—cuts loose with a haymaking right-cross that may dump you on the canvas, and a double-cross even after the bell.

Less figuratively, it concerns Philip St. Ives, professional negotiator between robbed and robbers for the return of heisted loot, when the ancient brass shield of Komporeen, sacred symbol to both warring factions of a new African republic, is stolen from the Coulter Museum in Washington. The museum's billionaire patron will pay almost any ransom for the shield. But St. Ives, as go-between, must first find the thieves and negotiate.

Beginning at the office of enigmatic Frances Wingo, he shuttles between Washington and New York in the heat of August no less than the heat of a death-pursuit that leaves corpses behind; the cops can't be blamed for their lack of sympathy. Everybody wants that shield, from American hoods to giant, amiable, Sandhurst-trained Colonel Mbwato of Jandola, on the side of the government in the Jandolan civil war.

St. Ives's chase roars to its finale in the Virginia countryside, reaching crescendo at the scene of some famous violence in another civil war: the battlefield of Manassas. The author plays fair throughout; and, if he is almost the only one in the story who does, that's the plan or purpose of all good mysteries.

The sensational events of *The Captors,* by John Farris (Trident, $5.95) have just begun when a kidnapped girl, Carol Watterson, escapes from bondage and returns to her background of country-house wealth. Neither Carol's mother nor her short-tempered old grand-

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father, the general, has been more concerned than that most understanding of step-fathers, Sam Holland.

Something still wrong, too. Why wouldn't the kidnappers collect their ransom money? Whatever happened to Carol during those lost days and nights, why must the girl behave so strangely now that she's safe?

But Carol is not safe; nobody is safe, as tension increases and pressures mount towards eruption. *The Captors* relies so heavily on emotion that you think it won't give all the clues; you think it can't live up to its premise or its promise. But it triumphantly succeeds in all, before a burst of gunplay and the swoop of the great falcon. Expertly done, highly recommended.

Any reader who opens John Gardner's *A Complete State of Death* (Viking, $4.95) expecting to meet Boysie Oates, that comic anti-spy of British Intelligence, instead will find a serious-minded Anglo-Italian Scotland Yard officer, Derek Torry, who has had his early police training in America. With equal skill our author can handle either wild espionage caper or the straightforward investigation by which Inspector Torry tracks and cracks a murderous crime ring of intricate structure and long arm.

One or two devotees may sigh for the zany days of Boysie Oates and his blondes; but shall a writer with so many talents as Mr. Gardner be denied the full range of versatility? And Derek Torry's Susan, before we have finished, behaves very like some free-wheeling gal from an earlier novel. If this adventure cannot be called classic detection of purest ray, it's a gripping chronicle that will hold you until the end.

The Allingham Case-Book, by Margery Allingham (Morrow, $5.50) contains some of the best stories ever written by my late colleague in crime. We were both taught short-story technique by one of the great editors, Reeves Shaw of the old *Strand Magazine;* and, though it seems small praise of her to say I attended the same school, she learned lessons her colleague so often bungled.

Nor, in musing over these eighteen tales, can an old friend forget the delightful weekend he spent with Margery Allingham and her husband at their Essex home more than a decade ago. Though not every story features Albert Campion, one of the best amateur sleuths, each displays his creatrix's ingenuity, charm, and acid sense of irony. All are excellent; more than a few—*Little Miss Know-All, One Morning They'll Hang Him, Joke Over, The Lying-in-State*—inspire profound admiration. Read 'em and see.

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DISCOVERY

an "unknown" Karmesin story by

GERALD KERSH

first publication in the United States

Shortly after Gerald Kersh's untimely death, Mrs. Kersh came upon the manuscript of a hitherto unknown tale of Karmesin. She sent it to us, and naturally we did not hesitate a moment in arranging to publish, for the first time in America, what is probably the last of the Karmesin Kapers. The last, alas . . .

Need we remind you? The Klever, Kolossal Karmesin was the world's greatest criminal—or the world's greatest liar. As always, you may take your choice . . .

At the same time that Mrs. Kersh sent us the "last" Karmesin, she also sent us the last story that Gerald Kersh wrote before his death. It is a fascinating novelet titled "Mr. Tomorrow"—about Swindle Sheet Morris and the Mafia. Watch for another announcement—"Mr. Tomorrow" will appear in EQMM soon . . .

KARMESIN THE FIXER

by GERALD KERSH

GOD HOW I WAS SINGING! AT the top of my voice. I rummaged in my repertoire for something which would enable me to let myself go, picked on *Celeste Aïda,* and let it out in a bellow. "Ce-leste Aï -daaaaaaaa. Ce-leste A-hi-daaaaaa. CE-LESTE AI-DAAA—"

"Shut up," said Karmesin. "Why do you sing? I mean, why do you try to sing? They have a jail in Pau where they have a rusty lock. When the turnkey

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locks you in it sounds just like that. So be so kind as to shut up. What is this?"—I had thrown over a pack of cigarettes—"*Sacré nom du marché parelléle!*"

Karmesin was looking at the pack as if he could not believe the evidence of his eyes. He gaped. His nostrils twitched in anticipatory zest.

"What *is* this?" he said again. "*Twenty* cigarettes? *Real* cigarettes! For the love of God stop singing, my friend." I stopped. Karmesin had already taken five cigarettes out of the packet. "Noise Tax," he said, pocketing four. "Have you a match?"

"Or would you prefer a cigar?" I asked. I unclenched my right hand and showed him ten pounds in banknotes. He picked them up, examined each one to see if it was genuine. I said, "One of the stories you told me—I wrote it down and sold it for ten pounds. Take a pound of it."

Karmesin became black in the face. "You rat," he said, "*Fetiuk*! You despicable animal! *Pfui* on you, you species of camel! Ten filthy dirty miserable pounds! You sold your soul—I mean my soul—for *that*! And now you are generous. You take the skin off my back and generously return my shirt. Hoo! You sell *my* birthright for a mess of pottage. I will not take your pound. Oof! . . . Why didn't you ask for twenty-five?"

"They wouldn't have paid it."

"But you could have asked. But no. You slink into the office and say, 'Oh, please,' and 'Oh, thank you'—you worm of worms. You should have *demanded* more. But. But, always but. I know. You wanted the money. Fool, you should have pretended *not* to want the money. You should have turned it over with your walking stick and said '*Pfui.*' "

"Are you taking this pound or not?" I waved one of the notes at him. "You deserve at least ten percent commission."

"My young friend, am I a commission agent? No, keep your money. I am magnanimous. I give it to you—your story after all. I have only worked on commission once, and that was not, I assure you, for such despicable chicken feed. No, I will not take your pound. I will, if you insist, borrow it. But as commission? No. Never shall it be said that Karmesin betrayed a confidence. I will tell you about it, but not for publication. Give me your word of honor''—I said nothing—very well, buy me tea, and a cigar. Yes, I want a cigar. A three-and-sixpenny cigar. The pound is only a loan . . .

"The only time I ever consented to work on a commission basis I made two hundred thousand pounds. Only I did not make that respectable sum of money by grabbing in an undignified

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way after a dirty, measly, niggardly sum. I can imagine your beady little pig's eyes popping out of your head, eh? Bah to you! Say somebody laid down on this table before you five thousand pounds in notes. What would you do? You would scream like a stuck hog and fix your grubby little hands on it. No? Yes. One day I shall teach you the value of self-denial . . . ."

I may have mentioned to you that I am a genius (said Karmesin). This was genius—the simplest deal of my career. As an operative in any business, I always played for big money. The chicken feed, the dirty little hundreds and thousands—bah, I threw them aside. Let smaller men scramble for such handfuls of maize. I, Karmesin, play high. I have a reputation as a man who can do, or arrange to have done, anything under the sun.

If you wanted a new ruler in an obscure principality, you would only have to come to me, lay down a sum of money, and say, "Karmesin, do me the honor to arrange this small matter." I am a fixer. I have a peculiar charm. I can penetrate to any place on earth, from a pigsty to a palace. Kings have availed themselves of my universal contacts. Queens have had occasion to thank their lucky stars for my cold, clear brain which burns like a star, and for my nerves of steel, and for my will which is like rock. As for my discretion, it is proverbial. I never talk. Red-hot knives would not cut information out of me.

Now listen, for I am giving you the inside dope on a deal which took place in the post-war period. Such eras are all more or less alike, but they are the best of times for men like me. I was in Paris staying, as usual, at the most exclusive and luxurious hotel in the city. I had a little money about me, but only a very little. I had not been working, and had been amusing myself in no uncertain manner.

They will still tell you, in Istanbul, how I bathed the chorus girls of a whole cabaret in the finest champagne. A fact! One bathtub each, full to the brim. And I had to import the bathtubs, too. But that is all nothing. I was at the—let us say, the Hotel Behemoth. It is a haunt of kings and diplomats. The beds you sleep on have given rest to the noblest bones in the world. And sometimes, in the bath, you may find, clinging near the water taps, the hair from an Ambassador.

It was at the Behemoth that Julio Delamimi kicked the Ruritarian Prime Minister in the face and broke all his bridgework. The pieces were scattered all over the grillroom. So, staying at the Behemoth at the same time as

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I, was a certain Very Illustrious Personage. He was from the Balkans, and had the dark, sinister air of all Balkan potentates. I had better not mention his name: it is a great one. I am discreet.

We met one evening at the American Bar. He was slightly drunk and clamoring for a Thunderbird Cocktail—an obscure and unheard-of cocktail of incredible potency, of which only three men on earth know the recipe. I am one of these three. Barney, the barman, was nonplused. I came to the rescue. Soon we got into conversation. The Illustrious Personage had heard of me. He had heard my name in connection with the Mexican silver deal that so shocked the Paris Bourse. We got friendly. I dined with him. He dined with me. Then he opened his heart.

My friend, I can open hearts as other men open tomato-cans. He told me he was on a kind of trade mission. He had to buy some rifles. That should have been easy enough; but there was a hitch. His government had entrusted him with 400,000 pounds in cash. He had done away with 100,000. How, he didn't quite know.

Certainly, he had had a dream about Number Nine, and had done mad things with heavy money at Monte Carlo. Again, half the ballet dancers in Paris had broken out in diamonds as if it were a rash. In a word, he had only 300,000 pounds left with which to buy 400,000 pounds worth of guns, and he needed help.

His credit, I may say, stank. Besides, he wanted the matter hushed up. He wanted to do a bit of fixing—10,000 pounds here, 10,000 pounds there, and so get away with 400,000 pounds worth of guns at the price of 300,000. He was prepared to pay the 300,000 pounds in cash.

But who would help him?

I said, "My friend, be easy. It is as good as settled. I know everybody. Meet me tomorrow at six, and we can arrange it all."

That night I made inquiries. By the following day at noon I was in possession of certain essential personal details about the men whom he was due to meet. When I saw the Very Illustrious Personage I had the whole story at my fingertips.

I could get him his arms for 200,000 pounds cash, I told him. "Twenty-five thousand will satisfy me, just for making the deal," I said.

He took out a bundle of notes as thick as a plum cake. "No," I said, "don't pay me now. Pay me afterwards. When the deal goes through satisfactorily then you can pay me."

He was delighted. At last he had found an honest man. "But

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Mr. So-and-so (naming a very highly placed government official) will want seventy-five thousand pounds as his share in the deal," I added.

Out came the roll again. I pooh-poohed it. "No," I said. "He must wait, as I am. He must not get a penny until everything is satisfactorily concluded, and your goods are shipped."

It is here, my idiotic young friend, that you would have spoiled everything, by going blue about the gills and seizing all the money in sight.

But me? *Pfui!*

We arranged that he should meet me at the Hotel Mastodon in Park Lane on January fifth, and I went away. Is there significance in the date? My young friend! No, just verisimilitude. You will never get anywhere without a mind like a card-index file.

Now it so happened that, by some means which nobody was ever able to trace, word leaked through to the English police. Scotland Yard instantly nosed into the affair. They simply discovered that my Very Illustrious friend was due to meet me in London on the fifth.

They waited for him. He was flying over. A couple of extremely amiable detectives met his Excellency as the plane descended, and asked him who he was. They looked at his passport, and their foreheads touched the ground. Then they asked him if he had any money with him.

"Yes," he said, producing his wallet. They counted his wad, and turned pale. Their hands shook as they returned the money.

"You must leave the country at once," they said to him. Protest was useless. You know the English police; you cannot argue with them.

The plane took my friend back, but I was not too worried. Had he been dragged out of my fingers just as everything was all right? But no, I reassured myself. And not in vain.

Three days later I received a message. He was back in England. He had chartered a special boat to land him on the coast and had made his way to London. I had planned it, of course, and so it went smoothly.

And so we met, as arranged, at the Mastodon, and sat down to drink a cognac and to talk.

"It is all arranged," I told him.

"Do you give your friend his seventy-five thousand pounds?" he asked, producing his wallet.

"No," I said firmly, "it must be when everything is perfectly satisfactory."

"Then, at least, take your twenty-five thousand."

"Afterwards," I said. "When the matter is arranged."

"I have never met such a man," he said, in delight. "I shall have

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you decorated with the Order of Saint Sapphira, First Class. I shall also have you made a baron."

"I am honored," I said.

Notice how calm I remained. "Are you sure you won't take your twenty-five thousand now?" he asked. I shook my head decisively.

"As you wish," he said. "What must I do then?"

"Pay for the goods, and then have them delivered w i t h o u t delay. I can help you arrange delivery. I can then with a clear conscience take my commission."

"Will you pay the sellers?" he asked. "I shall feel happier if you do it."

"As you wish," I said. "But perhaps you'll feel better if you do it yourself."

"No, no."—"Yes, yes."—"No, no."—"Yes, yes."—"No, no."

"But I insist," he said. "My dear, dear friend, I insist."

"Very well," I replied, with a shrug, and took the 200,000 pounds which he handed me. It was all profit instead of a trifling percentage of a rum deal. And so I cleared out, and that is the end of the story . . .

Karmesin finished his tea with a terrible v'hooping noise.

I said, "Really, I d o n ' t believe—"

Karmesin said, "*Pfui* on you, you s k e p t i c ! *Himmelherrgott kreutzmillion — endonnerwetter* and blast! I will break both your legs! How dare you judge a genius by your petty standards? I know right from the start you would have spoiled everything by petty greediness."

I repeated, "Really, I don't believe a word of it. There are many reasons for not believing it—two hundred t h o u s a n d pounds!—and nothing but your word . . ."

"Who cares about that?" said Karmesin calmly. "Remember, I had a reputation for financial and commercial wizardry. Again, confidence was created by my refusing huge sums of money. You can ask any crime reporter on the newspapers, or any Inspector at Scotland Yard, if this is not a true story. They all know I did it. But no charge was laid against me, and so I could never be touched as a consequence of it. This tea is terrible. England drinks the dregs of the tea crop. Really," he mimicked, "I shall have to look into Mincing Lane and tell them—"

"And what did you do with the money?" I asked.

"The two hundred thousand pounds? Can I remember every penny I spend? God knows. I forget," said Karmesin, surreptitiously filling his w a i s t c o a t pockets with sugar.

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About the big black man with a horn—one clear sweet honey of a story . . .

ONE CLEAR SWEET CLUE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT Otto Grant, the best trumpet player ever to come out of Philadelphia. Can I support that? No, but I heard him at his best and I don't expect to hear anybody better.

He was a very black man, tall with shoulders like a good heavyweight. The trumpet he played almost disappeared in those big hands of his and when he stood up in the spotlight for a solo you saw those two big black fists with a couple of fingers like cigars moving on top of the horn which he seemed to be molding in his hands as though it was a soft handful of gold. And from the bottom of the tubing he had a little pair of toy leather boxing gloves hanging, the kind of thing you see suspended from the rear-view mirror in a taxi.

Everybody else in the band wore a suit, but Otto never did. Otto always wore slacks and an expensive cashmere sweater. In the winter he wore a white shirt under it with the collar open, and in summer, like on the July night when this ugly thing happened, he wore nothing under it. So he stood up there, this giant of a man, with the cashmere buttoned just at the bottom and the sweat glistening on his ebony chest, and the little boxing gloves swaying from that golden horn while he blew the whole room back against the walls.

Listen, you ever hear Roy Eldridge play *After You've Gone?* Well, Otto was like that, only cleaner and a lot more powerful.

But don't come into Le Big Bang club looking for Otto Grant; he doesn't play there any more. Oh, you'll probably find Eloise Carpentier's blonde head weaving about the bar unless they've busted her again. And you'll find Tancred Falardeau—he's the fat man playing the piano and drinking Cinzano. For free. He owns the place, too.

Who am I? Well, I'm the guy in the mirror there, the one losing his hair but not his smile. My

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name's John Keeley. I write advertising copy all day, so I can afford to sit here nights and play tenor barstool.

That's exactly what I was trying to do the night it happened. But at first I had trouble getting in. I drove up about 9:30 in my old MG with the top down and angle-parked in Tancred's private zone out front. It was empty, so he must have come down by cab that night. There was a lineup of a dozen or so couples leaning on the old painted brick front—McGill guys and kids from U. de M. in their ice-cream jackets and girls in miniskirts supporting Montreal's claim to more good leg per yard of downtown pavement than any other city in North America. There were also a few hippies down from the Lincoln Avenue district with their beads and beards and sackcloth looking like a bunch of slaves who had stolen the sandals off their Roman guards.

There was obviously no room inside. But with the windows open I could enjoy the music along with the comfort of my bucket seat. Not to mention a cool breath of air drifting up from the St. Lawrence. I was sitting easy, watching the night insects two-stepping on my windshield when Tony d'Amico came by, tried to buck the line, and was thrown for a loss against my fender.

"Ey," I said, "be my guest."

"Johnny," he called, flashing a couple of rows of those white teeth he keeps like a keyboard in that polished mahogany Steinway of a face. Tony d'Amico is 45 years old with a wife and about 400 kids at home. I saw his wife once leading part of the pack through Morgan's in search of shoes. She was carrying the ten-pound bonus that went with each baby, and the kids trailed after her with closed-up faces like a lot of little worried old people. Tony, meanwhile, looks about 19. And acts it.

"Thanks, my friend. No room inside, eh?"

"Oh, there's plenty of room. But all these people and I have just discovered that with both front windows open, the whole building acts like a big speaker and if you stand in the right place you get stereo."

Tony searched my eyes a moment, then grabbed both my shoulders and shook hard. "Ah, you advertising guys!"

"How's the instrument repair business?" I said.

"Good. I'm reconditioning all the instruments for the Black Watch band now."

"I've got an idea for you, a new musical instrument you can develop."

This time Tony was already grinning. "Yeah, yeah?" he said, licking his lips.

"Well, everybody has electric

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guitars, right? So you are going to come out with the first gas guitar. Gas is cheaper than electricity—everybody knows that."

"Sure, and when the cat is on the road, staying in one of those beat-up rooms, he can heat the room with his guitar and also cook his meals on it."

"The way I see it, only one problem," I went along.

The black eyebrows went way up in anticipation.

"When it's outdoors, what's to keep the wind from blowing out the pilot light?"

We were choking and hitting one another when Eloise Carpentier floated past. This girl must weigh a hundred and twenty pounds—hell, I can *see* almost that much uncovered—and yet she moves without touching anything or anybody. A hummingbird. She hovers. No friction anywhere. And she smiles with just one side of her mouth like she knows what *you're* thinking, old friend.

Rumor had it she and Otto were kind of close the last week or so and now she saw me and moved close to the car, but not touching, and said, "You see Otto out here, Johnny?"

"No, but I heard him playing before. He must be on the stand."

"I was in earlier but he wasn't there. He was late. If you see him tell him I gotta see him right away."

"Sure, Eloise."

There was no problem with the lineup when Eloise went inside. They melted and flowed around her and she was gone.

"That dolly wants just one thing from Otto," Tony said. "He better stay clean."

"What one thing is that?"

"Well, you know how she is."

"No, how is she?"

"The big H. That's why she hangs around musicians all the time—she figures they can help her feed her habit. Lucky she has money."

I had never heard that about Eloise. Well, maybe it explained her distance from me at least. If she was an addict, than I was not her man and she must have sensed it. But the information was unsettling and suddenly I didn't want to kid around with Tony d'Amico any more. So I eased myself out of the cockpit and stepped over the car door. "Guess I'll crash in the back way. Want to come?"

"This is so nice, I'd like to sit here. Do you mind?"

"Help yourself."

The alleyway was dim and cool compared to Notre Dame Street. I picked my way among the garbage cans and the crates and squeezed past a fat limousine parked near the back door of the club. There were two people standing close to the dead end of the alley. I recognized the slight

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black-skinned one. He was a busboy on Tancred's staff. The other man looked familiar.

"Hey, Mr. Keeley," the boy said, and it was the voice of a non-swimmer in deep water.

"What's up, Peter?"

"Just go inside, mister," the other one growled. "This doesn't concern you."

I recognized the older man now, from years ago on the Main. He was a little thicker through the middle but his teeth were still bad and he still wore a couple of days' growth of whiskers under the narrow-brimmed straw hat.

"How's the dirty picture business?" I asked casually.

"Just go inside, and no sweat."

"Come on, Pete," I said, "I want to talk to you."

The hood put one hand on the young man's arm. "He owes me dough."

"It's protection," the boy said. "I only make sixty bucks a week. I can't afford to be shook down."

The back door of the club opened then and a cocktail waitress pointed out the scene to Otto Grant who eased past her into the alley.

"Keep out of this, Grant," the older man warned. "We leave you musicians alone, so don't interfere."

"He's gonna thump me, Otto."

"No, he isn't. Inside, Pete." The boy ducked under Otto's arm and scuttled through the door.

"That's a mistake, Grant," the man said, but that was all he could get out before Otto took two handfuls of jacket and shirt and lifted him clear off the ground and slammed him hard against the brick wall. Cloth tore and buttons rattled on the pavement. Then Otto dropped him.

"Get out of here," Otto said, "or I'll turn you around and smooth your face off on that brick."

The hood slipped into his car and started the engine. Before he drove away, his contorted face appeared at the window. "This isn't over, black boy."

When the alley was quiet again, I said to Otto, "That's trouble for sure."

"If he wants to make trouble for me he'll have to get in line. I got all kinds of enemies."

Protection racketeers are one kind of enemy, but I would never have nominated Air Corps personnel from the Plattsburg air base as another kind.

It started around 11:30 when Otto came off the stand at the end of a set. The boys in uniform wanted to buy him a drink but Otto was on his way to the bar to sit with Eloise. This raised the volume of the voices from the military table, and one that was well coated with the molasses of the deep South got on Otto's back particularly. I didn't see the first punch but I did see the tall black

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figure in cashmere wading into the uniforms and there was blood and screaming and smashed furniture and splintered glass.

Tancred played *Stars and Stripes Forever*, but that didn't help much. In fact, things calmed down only when the cops arrived a few minutes later. When she saw the badges Eloise disappeared into the Ladies' Room which reminded me of Tony d'Amico's comment earlier. Tancred refused to press charges against the Air Corps lads but asked them to stay away. So the atmosphere cleared and young Pete swept up the debris and everybody sat down again, exhilarated and happy not to have missed the brawl.

I went backstage to find Otto sitting on a Coke case with a wet handkerchief held against his mouth. Tancred was walking back and forth, still nervous.

"You see this guy, Johnny?" Tancred said. "He's a hazard. Now he can't even play."

Otto turned the cloth and I saw the bruised lip. No trumpet for a while. "What set it off?"

"I put my kinky woolly head too close to the girl with the smooth blonde hair. In Alabama that means war."

Tancred poured several Chiclets from the package directly into his mouth, chewing them into the quid. As he wadded it into his cheek he looked like a fat Nelly Fox at the mound for a conference. "Okay, we have customers to entertain. Go home, Otto, and look after that mouth. Put meat on it, or call the doctor. Have you got the key?"

Otto shook his head. He was looking tired.

"Take mine." Tancred pulled a key from a jingling ring and tossed it to Otto and the trumpeter left.

I hung around till one and then I cut out and broke the law by driving home with my limbs sluggish with beer. I parked the car on Crescent Street outside my apartment building, just begging for the law to hit me. Then I pursued my antisocial course by neglecting to brush my teeth, undressed raggedly, leaving my clothes where they fell, and dropped onto the bed heavily . . .

The telephone rang. I turned on the light and picked up the receiver, noting the time was 4:50.

"Hello?"

"Johnny, this is Tancred. Otto is dead."

"What?"

"I'm down at the club. The cops found him in the alley."

"Dead? What happened?"

"He was beat around the head. Can you come down?"

By the time I got to the club they were taking Otto away. If you could call that long still shape on the stretcher Otto. I wanted to see him, for some reason, and

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one of the attendants drew back the sheet. The broad black face was composed; he appeared to be asleep. I saw the bruised lip from the fight earlier, and another mark above one eye.

Tancred must have read my mind because his voice, soft just behind me, said, "It's the back of his head. There must have been quite a lot of blood, but there's not much in the alley. So he was killed somewhere else."

"Were you the one who found him?"

"No, a cop on the beat. Routine check. I was still inside but I was in my office upstairs in the front. I didn't hear anything."

The sun was rising and the alley was bright. The police ambulance left and a bus hissed its brakes on Notre Dame Street. Tancred took me inside and introduced me to a plainclothesman, Detective Sergeant Charland.

"Were you with the man last night?" Charland asked.

"Yes, I talked to him a couple of times."

"You saw the fight?"

"With the Air Corps guys? You think they did it?"

"They had reason," Tancred said.

"We're checking it out. Anything you can tell us we don't know?"

I remembered the confrontation with the protection hood in the alley. "Yes, I think I have a better lead." I told Charland about the scuffle and suggested he talk to young Pete.

"We know those guys. Okay, that's all for now. Neither of you go away for a while, eh, without letting me know. I may want to see you again."

Tancred offered me a drink after the police left but I didn't feel like it. I said I'd drive him home and he accepted. Neither of us spoke as my MG roared up Bleury Street and onto Park Avenue, past Fletcher's Field and the Cross on the Mountain glimmering pale against the lightened sky. I turned into Outremont, negotiating the empty streets swiftly, passing dozens of fine homes set back on the high terraces away from Côte Ste. Catherine Road, stopping finally before the one that was the Falardeau family home.

Tancred was the only one left since the death of his parents in an air crash, not counting an older sister who lived in Miami and whose name never crept into Tancred's conversation. There had been plenty of room for Otto Grant to live here and now the population of the great old house had diminished again to one.

"Come in, will you, Johnny? Just for a few minutes?"

He didn't have to draw up a list of reasons why he didn't want to open the heavy oak door and step into the cool marble and

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mahogany vestibule alone. I kept in step. In the dining room Tancred found glasses and a bottle of brandy and this time, without asking, he poured generous splashes into a couple of balloon glasses, handed one to me, and raised his to his lips.

"Wherever the hell he is," he said.

I drank to that and then followed my host down steps and around a narrow corner into a large room heavily draped at both ends. Acoustic tiles were set into the ceiling and several comfortable chairs were arranged to face a bare wall that held a built-in record player and amplifiers with speakers in all the corners.

The floor in front of the chairs was bare parquet and this is what surprised Tancred. He stopped and looked at the shiny floor and then he said, "What happened to the rug?"

My attention was diverted to the cabinet of records backed against the wine-colored drapes. A door hung open, several records were scattered on the floor, and at least one was broken. I touched Tancred's arm with my glass and inclined my head.

"Good God," he said, walking to the records and sorting through them. "These are my old Django Reinhart seventy-eights—collector's items. What's been going on here?"

"Anything missing?"

"I can't tell until I check. But what happened?"

Sergeant Charland came up with a lab man and a couple of constables right after we called him. They went over the room and found some scuff marks at one edge of the parquet floor, an area not covered by the missing rug, and a few minutes later, some dried blood and bits of hair on a sharp edge of the record-player cabinet.

"It happened here all right," Charland said. "We'll check out the hair sample and the blood but it will turn out to be Grant's, I'm sure." More questions followed concerning Tancred's relationship with Otto. Then, just before he left, the Sergeant produced a large fat manila envelope and spilled its contents onto the seat of a chair. "These are the personal effects we found on the body. Would you look through them and try to see if anything is missing, something you knew he carried?"

Tancred spotted it first. "Where's his mouthpiece?"

"His what?"

"The mouthpiece of his trumpet. It was a very special one that Otto designed himself and had custom-made. Whenever he wasn't playing he packed up his horn in its case, but he always carried the mouthpiece in his pocket."

A check of Otto's bedroom

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dresser failed to show up the mouthpiece. "Anyway, everything else was in his pockets. It's missing all right."

"Well, that's something to go on," Charland said.

But the police didn't go very far. In the months that followed, Tancred and I checked back with them to see if anything had developed; but there was no break in the case. The story was long gone from the newspapers—in fact, two more recent night-club killings erased the memory of Otto Grant. All Charland could tell us was that the Air Corps boys were proved innocent and so was the young hood from the protection racket. It wound up a case of "person or persons unknown."

Tancred found a new trumpet player, adequate but no Otto, and autumn followed summer, and then came the long Montreal winter with the street outside full of snow and the fireplace blazing to the right of the bandstand and waiters hustling jugs of mulled wine to the jazz fans. It was so cozy inside we were almost sorry to see spring arrive. Then it was July again, almost a year since Otto had been killed.

And that was when the fantastic thing happened: Otto Grant came back to point the finger at his killer. If you believe in signs you have to believe he spoke to us from the grave in the language he used better than anybody.

It was a warm Sunday evening. The club was closed and Tancred and I were strolling the downtown streets. We left the Peel and Ste. Catherine intersection with its lights and pretty girls and walked south into Dominion Square, attracted by the sounds of a band playing in the bandshell in the lower park. They sounded quite good, with that exciting quality a band takes on when it plays outdoors.

We hurried along the walkways past the display cases containing the annual exhibition of local artists. There was room on one of the back benches, so Tancred and I slipped in and made ourselves comfortable. The band finished the *Washington Post* march and the conductor acknowledged the applause and announced the next number, *Carnival of Venice.*

Then it happened.

The trumpet soloist had no sooner begun his first straight melody chorus before the famous variations when Tancred said, "That's Otto!"

It wasn't, of course. The soloist was a short red-haired man, but there was something familiar about the clarity of his tone. Tancred's ear is much better than mine and he could hardly contain himself. "That's Otto's mouthpiece! I'll lay odds."

The concert was long but we hung right in till *Oh, Canada.* Then, as the benches cleared and

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the musicians bent over their instrument cases, we approached the bandstand. The red-haired trumpet player was a cheerful little man.

"The mouthpiece? Yeah, I've had it for a few months. It's got great tone, eh?"

"And power. Where did you get it?"

"I had my horn reconditioned and the guy offered it to me for ten bucks."

"The guy who reconditioned your instrument? Who was that?"

"Tony d'Amico."

We didn't call on Tony that night because it was Sunday and he would be home with his family and our business, which was a year old, could wait another day.

Next morning I picked up Tancred in the MG at ten o'clock and we drove down to Vitre Street where Tony had his shop. There were no customers in the front of the store. We went behind the counter and into the back room and found Tony with a small blowtorch doing some work on the tubing of a big brass Sousaphone. We sat on a bench till Tony finished his work and then he joined us.

Tancred got right to the point. "How come you had Otto Grant's mouthpiece?"

There was the big white grin but the dark eyes in the mahogany face were wide and alert.

"I don't have anything of Otto's."

"Not now. But you sold Otto's mouthpiece to a trumpet player in the Fanfare de Pompiers. We spoke to him last night."

A lot of air went out of Tony and he sat down slowly. Nobody said anything. Back in the shop a repairman was tapping the bell of a trombone. Then Tony said quietly, "It fell out of his pocket. When I was rolling him up in the carpet."

"God help us, Tony," I said, "how did it happen?"

He got up and began walking back and forth, five paces this way and five paces between us and the worktable. "I didn't expect anybody to come in on me—I knew you'd be at the club till after two. It was those records of yours, Tancred. I'd heard them when I was at your place a couple of times, those old Vocalion sides and all the early Dickie Wells stuff and Chu Berry. It was a crazy thing for me to do, but I was going to steal a couple of them.

"I was getting the ones I wanted when all of a sudden there was Otto in the room. Even then I guess I would have been all right if I'd just kept cool and said you gave me permission to come in and listen. But I felt so small, really, and I didn't want you ever to know, so I tried to make a move for the door. Then

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Otto came at me. I guess he wouldn't have if he knew me but I don't think he recognized me, there was only a dim light on.

"Anyway, I got in a lucky punch on him—he could have handled me otherwise, easy. And he slipped and hit his head on the sharp edge of the cabinet—hit it real hard. When he didn't move for a while, I checked and found he was dead. I didn't want him found in your place—it seemed to me if he was found behind the club they'd link him up with the pushers or the racketeers down there."

"And that's what happened to my rug."

"Yes, I rolled him up and the mouthpiece fell on the floor, so I just slipped it in my pocket. Then I drove him downtown and waited till things got quiet. Around two thirty I took him down the alley and left him. Your rug is in my garage back home, behind a lot of junk."

"And the mouthpiece. Did you need the lousy ten bucks?"

"I just didn't want it around. I figured nobody would ever spot it, so I sold it to that band player."

Tancred said, "You might just as well have sold him Otto's right arm."

We agreed to let Tony speak to his wife at home before we took him to the police. The three of us squeezed into my MG and we drove out to Ville d'Anjou where Tony lives.

As we came up Tony's street with Tony kind of perched up high on the back of my car because it is really only a two-seater, some of his kids spotted us and came running. There must have been six of them to start with and one had a drum and some had kazoos. And this ragged little band began stepping along beside the car playing *When the Saints Go Marching In*. When we reached the d'Amico home and turned into the long driveway, several more of his kids joined the orchestra, some playing, some singing, one clacking maracas, and one waving his T shirt in front like a flag.

And that's the way the triumphant procession approached the house, with Tony trapped up there like a conquering hero and his wife out on the porch now, smiling and waving and with a big question mark on her face.

The whole thing outside, along with what happened when we went into the house, is a scene I'd like to erase from my mind forever. But I haven't been able to forget it yet and I guess I never will. Or big Otto either.

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a *NEW* Inspector Maigret novelet by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

Everything to make a "classic case" for Inspector Maigret: a Paris street, a fine, cold rain falling, and the homes and shops of quiet, unassuming people; Maigret waiting and watching and smoking his pipe—the eternal, patient Maigret; a twelve-year-old altar boy, eyewitness and earwitness to the aftermath of a crime—a devout little boy who never lied—and a retired, crusty old Judge who never lied . . . the story of a murder before dawn on a suburban street, in a peaceful neighborhood, in a bourgeois environment—Maigret's kind of case, "ordinary" and "special," "simple" and "complex" . . .

And the unforgettable picture of Maigret ill in bed, that great peevish bear of a man with chills and fever, solving a mystery on his back, between stolen pipefuls . . . The evidence, the truth were all-important—that is the whole *evidence, the* whole *truth . . .*

CRIME IN THE RUE SAINTE-CATHERINE

by GEORGES SIMENON

A FINE, COLD DRIZZLE WAS falling, and it was dark. The only light was toward the end of the street, near the barracks, where at half-past five the trumpets had sounded, and now you could hear the noise of horses being taken to be watered. There the dimly lit rectangle of a window could be seen: someone getting up early, or perhaps a sick person who had been awake all night.

The rest of the street was asleep. A wide quiet street, newish with houses all much the same,

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one- or at the most two-storied, such as are found in the suburbs of most big provincial towns.

The whole district was new, devoid of mystery; its inhabitants were quiet and unassuming—employees, traveling salesmen; people of limited means, peaceable widows.

Inspector Maigret, coat collar turned up, stood pressed into the corner of the entrance to the boys' school; he was waiting, watch in hand and smoking his pipe.

At a quarter to six precisely, the bells of the parish church rang out behind him, and he knew it was, as the boy had said, the "first stroke" of the six o'clock Mass.

The chimes were still reverberating in the damp air when he heard, or rather sensed, the jarring outburst of an alarm clock in the house opposite. It lasted only a few seconds. In the dark the child's hand must already have stretched out from the warmth of his bed and gropingly turned off the alarm. A few seconds later the attic window on the second floor lit up.

It was happening exactly as the boy had said. He was the first to get up, noiselessly, in the still-sleeping house. Now he must be throwing on his clothes, his socks, splashing water on his face and hands, running a comb through his hair. As for his shoes, he had stated, "I carry them downstairs and put them on on the bottom step in order not to wake my parents."

It had been the same every day, winter and summer, for almost two years, since Justin had started as altar boy at the six o'clock Mass at the hospital.

He had also told them: "The hospital clock is always three or four minutes behind the parish church."

And the Chief Inspector had proof of this. The day before, at the flying squad to which he had been assigned for some months, his Inspectors had shrugged at these detailed stories of bells and first strokes and second strokes. But Maigret, perhaps because he too had served as altar boy for a long time, had not found them laughable.

The parish bells first, at a quarter to six. Then Justin's alarm clock in the attic where he slept. Then, after a few minutes' interval, the higher-pitched, more silvery chimes of the hospital chapel, which made one think of convent bells.

Maigret was still holding his watch in his hand. The child took just a little more than four minutes to dress. His light went out. He must have been groping his way downstairs, still trying not to wake his parents. Sitting down on the bottom step and putting on his shoes, taking his coat and cap from the bamboo hatstand that

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stood on the right in the hallway.

The door opened. The youngster closed it without a sound, looked anxiously up and down the street, then saw the bulky silhouette of the Inspector approaching.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be there," the boy said. And he started off, walking fast. He was a little fellow of twelve, fair, thin, already self-willed.

"You want me to do just the same as the other days, don't you? I always walk quickly. At first it was to see how many minutes it would take me, and then in winter, when it's dark, I'm afraid. In a month from now, at this time, it'll begin to get light."

He took the first street on the right, another quiet street, rather shorter, which opened out on a square planted round with elm trees and crossed diagonally by streetcar tracks.

Maigret noticed minute details that brought back his own childhood. First, the youngster kept away from the houses as he walked, no doubt because he was afraid someone might step out of the shadow of a doorway. Then, to cross the square, he kept clear of the trees in the same way, for a man could have been hiding behind them.

In fact, he was a pretty brave little chap, as, for two winters, in all weathers, sometimes in thick fog or moonless dark, he had been going along the same route every morning all alone.

"When we get to the middle of the rue Sainte-Catherine," the boy said, "you'll hear the second stroke of the Mass from the parish church."

"What time does the first streetcar go past?"

"Six o'clock. I've only seen it two or three times when I was late. Once my alarm didn't go off. Another time I went back to sleep. That's why I always jump out of bed when it goes off."

A wan little face in the rainy darkness, eyes that still retained some of the stupor of sleep, a thoughtful expression with only the slightest hint of fear.

"I shan't go on serving at Mass. It's only because you insisted that I came today."

They turned left on to the rue Sainte-Catherine where, as in all the other streets in the district, there was a lamp every fifty yards or so, each throwing a pool of light. Between these the child unconsciously walked more quickly than when he was crossing each reassuring circle of lamplight.

The distant noises of the barracks could still be heard. Lights were coming on in some of the windows. Someone was walking somewhere in a cross street.

"When you got to the corner of the street you didn't see anything?"

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That was the critical point, for the rue Sainte-Catherine was quite straight and deserted. With the pavements straight as a die, and streetlamps at regular intervals, there was not enough shadow between them for one to miss seeing, even at a hundred yards, two men having a row.

"Perhaps I wasn't looking where I was going. I was talking to myself, I remember. I often do in the morning when I'm going this way, talk away to myself under my breath... I wanted to ask my mother something when I got home and I was repeating to myself what I was going to say to her."

"What did you want to say to her?"

"For a long time I've wanted a bike. I've already saved up one hundred francs out of what I get for the Masses."

It may have been just an impression, but it seemed to Maigret that the child was keeping farther out from the houses. He even stepped off the pavement, then got onto it a little farther on.

"Here it is. Listen—that's the second stroke chiming at the parish church."

Meanwhile Maigret was trying, quite unconscious of the absurdity, to penetrate into that world that was the boy's world each morning.

"I must have raised my head. You know, like when one is running without looking and one finds oneself up against a wall... It was right at this spot." He pointed to the line on the pavement that separated the shadow from the light of a streetlamp, in which the fine rain was dancing like luminous dust.

"First I noticed there was a man stretched out, and he seemed so big that I'd have sworn he took up the whole width of the pavement."

That was impossible, for the pavement was about eight feet wide.

"I don't know what I did exactly. I must have swerved out of the way. I didn't run off right away because I saw the knife in his chest, with a thick brown horn handle—I noticed it because my Uncle Henri has a knife almost the same and he told me it was stag's horn. I'm sure the man was dead."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He looked dead."

"His eyes were closed?"

"I didn't notice his eyes. I don't know any more. But I had a feeling he was dead. It all happened very quickly, as I told you yesterday in your office. But I had to repeat the same things so many times all day yesterday that I'm mixed up. Especially when I feel no one believes me."

"And the other man?"

"When I looked up I saw there

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was someone a little farther on, perhaps fifteen feet or so away. Someone with very bright eyes. He looked at me for a second, and started to run. It was the murderer."

"How d'you know?"

"Because he ran off as fast as he could."

"Which direction?"

"Straight down there."

"Towards the barracks, in fact?"

"Yes."

It was true that Justin had been questioned at least ten times the previous day. Before Maigret's arrival at the office, the other Inspectors had even made a sort of game of it. But not once had the boy changed the smallest detail.

"What did you do?"

"I started to run, too. It's difficult to explain .... I think it was when I saw the man running away that I felt frightened. And then I ran as fast as I could."

"In the opposite direction?"

"Yes."

"You didn't think of calling for help?"

"No. I was too scared. Most of all I was afraid my legs would suddenly give out, for I couldn't feel them any longer. I ran back as far as the place du Congrès. I took the other street. It also leads to the hospital, but the long way round."

"Let's go on."

Bells again, high-pitched bells, the chapel ones. After another fifty yards or so there was a crossroads and on the left were the loopholed walls of the barracks, on the right a vast dimly-lit doorway surmounted by the greenish dial of a clock.

It was three minutes to six.

"I'm a minute late. Yesterday, in spite of everything I got here on time because I ran."

In the middle of the oak door there was a heavy knocker, which the boy raised. The din echoed through the porch. A slippered porter came to open up, let Justin through, and placed himself in Maigret's path, looking at him with suspicion. "What is it?"

"Police."

"You've got your identification?"

You crossed a porch, where the first hospital odors greeted you; then, through a second door, you found yourself in a vast courtyard full of outbuildings. Far away in the shadows you could make out the white headdresses of the nuns on their way to the chapel.

"Why didn't you say anything to the porter yesterday?"

"I don't know. I was hurrying to get there."

Maigret could understand that. For the boy it wasn't the lodge with its distrustful, grumpy porter that was a haven, or this cold courtyard where stretchers were borne silently past. It was the

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warm sacristy, near the chapel, where one of the sisters was lighting the altar candles.

There were two poles, in fact, for the boy each morning and he went from one to the other in a dizzy rush—his room under the roof, from which the ringing of the alarm clock dragged him, and, at the other end of a sort of void filled only with the chimes of the bells, the sacristy of the chapel.

"You're coming in with me?"

"Yes."

Justin seemed put out, or rather shocked, no doubt at the idea of this Inspector, who was perhaps an unbeliever, penetrating into his sacred world. Maigret could understand now why the child had the courage to get up so early every morning and overcome his fears.

The chapel was warm and cosy. Already the patients in their gray-blue uniforms, some with their heads bandaged, some with their arms in slings, some on crutches, were lined up on the seats in the nave. In the gallery the sisters formed up like a uniform troupe, and all the white coifs dipped at the same time in mystic reverence.

"Follow me."

They had to go up a few steps, pass near the altar, where the candles were already burning. On the right there was a dark-paneled sacristy, a tall bony priest who was finishing putting on his vestments, a lace-trimmed surplice that was ready for the boy, and a nun busy filling the altar vessels.

It was only at this point, the day before, that Justin, panting, his throat dry and his legs shaky, had come to a halt. It was here he had cried out, "A man has just been killed in the rue Sainte-Catherine."

A small clock set into the paneling showed six o'clock exactly. Bells were ringing again; they were less distinct inside than out. Justin said to the nun who was helping him with his surplice, "It's the police Inspector."

Maigret stood there while the child, preceding the chaplain, shook out the folds of his red cassock and hurried toward the altar steps.

The vestry nun had said "Justin is a good little boy. Very devout. He has never told us a lie. Sometimes he hasn't turned up to serve the Mass. He could have pretended he was sick. But no, he admitted quite openly that he couldn't bear to get up because it was too cold, or because he had had nightmares during the night and was feeling tired."

And the chaplain, Mass over, had looked at the Inspector with eyes as bright as those of a stained-glass saint, and said, "Why should you think this child would make up such a story?"

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Maigret knew now what had happened in the hospital chapel. How Justin's teeth had chattered and how, at the end of his tether, he had a fit of hysterics. Mass musn't be held up, so the sacristy nun warned the Sister Superior, and took the place of the child, who meanwhile was being fussed over in the vestry.

It was ten minutes before the Sister Superior thought of informing the police. She had to go through the chapel. Everybody felt something was afoot. At the local headquarters the desk sergeant could not understand.

"What? Sister Superior? Superior to what?"

So she repeated gently in her convent voice that a crime had been committed in the rue Sainte-Catherine. And the police had found nothing, neither victim nor, of course, murderer . . .

As he did every day, Justin had gone to school at half-past eight as if nothing had happened, and he was in class when Inspector Besson, a chunky little man who looked like a boxer and played the tough guy, had come for him at half-past nine, when the report had reached the flying squad.

Poor boy, for two hours in a gloomy office that reeked of pipe smoke and the stove that didn't draw, he had been questioned, not as a witness but like a suspect. One after the other, three Inspectors—Besson, Thiberge, and Vallin—had tried to make him waver in his story.

And then, for good measure, his mother had followed the child. She waited in the anteroom, crying and sniffing by turn and telling everyone, "We're honest people. We've never had any trouble with the police."

Maigret, who had been working late the night before on a narcotics case, hadn't arrived in his office until around eleven.

"What's this?" he had asked on seeing the boy, dry-eyed, and looking with his skinny legs for all the world like an indignant little cock.

"A brat who's trying to make fools of us. He says he saw a corpse in the street—he even saw the murderer who ran away at his approach. But a streetcar passed along the same street four minutes later and the driver saw nothing. The street is a quiet one, and nobody heard anything. Furthermore, when the police were called, a quarter of an hour later, by some nun or other, there was absolutely nothing on the pavement, not the least speck of blood."

"Come into my office, son."

Maigret was the first person who had spoken civilly to Justin that morning, the first to treat him like a grownup and not like some brat with a vivid imagination.

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Maigret had made him repeat his story, simply and quietly, without interrupting and without taking notes.

"You're going to go on serving Mass at the hospital?"

"No. I never want to go there again. I'm too scared."

But it was a heavy sacrifice. The child was certainly devout, he certainly responded to the poetry of early Mass in the warm, rather mysterious atmosphere of the chapel. And, besides, he was paid for these Masses, not much, but enough to let him put aside a little nest egg. And he did so long to have the bicycle his parents couldn't afford to give him.

"I'm going to ask you to go there once again. Only once. Tomorrow morning."

"I wouldn't dare to walk that way."

"I'll come with you. I'll wait for you in front of your house. And you'll do exactly the same as all the other times."

And that was how Maigret had found himself all alone at seven in the morning at the hospital entrance, in a district that the day before he knew only from having passed through by streetcar or automobile.

An icy drizzle was still falling from the sky, which was now a watery green. Eventually it soaked into the Inspector's coat and he sneezed twice. There were several people passing by, coat collars turned up and hands in pockets; at the butchers' and grocers' the shutters were being opened.

It was the most ordinary, peaceful district you could possibly imagine. Only with the greatest difficulty could you conceive of two men, even two drunks, having a row at five or six in the morning on the pavement of the rue Sainte-Catherine.

But then there was the sequel. According to the boy's statement, at his approach the murderer had run off, and it had then been five to six. Now, at six, the first streetcar went by and the driver insisted he had seen nothing. Of course, he could have had his attention distracted, could have been looking in the opposite direction.

But at five past six, two police constables who were coming off their beat had walked along that very same pavement. And *they* had seen nothing.

At seven or eight minutes past six, a cavalry officer who lived three houses away from the spot Justin had pointed out had left home as he did every morning to go to the barracks. *He* hadn't seen anything, either.

Finally, at six twenty, the constables had cycled from the district police station and *they* had found no trace of the victim.

Had someone come meanwhile and removed the body in a car

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or truck? Soberly and without any fuss, Maigret had set out to envisage all the possibilities, and this one had turned out to be as false as the others. There was a sick woman at Number 42 in the street, and her husband had been up with her all night. He was quite positive.

"We can hear all the noises from outside. I was paying special attention as my wife, who is in great pain, is upset by the slightest noise. Wait a moment... It was the streetcar that woke her, just as she had dropped off. I can tell you that no car went past before seven that morning. The first thing to go by was the dustcart."

"And you heard nothing else?"

"There was a sound of running at one point."

"Before the streetcar?"

"Yes, for my wife was sleeping. I was getting myself a cup of coffee."

"One person running?"

"More like two."

"You don't know in which direction?"

"The blind was down. As it makes a noise when you pull it up, I didn't look out."

That was the only evidence in support of Justin's story.

There was a bridge about two hundred yards away, and the constable on duty had not seen any car passing. One would have to suppose that only a few minutes after running away the murderer had come back, heaved his victim onto his shoulders, and carried him off heaven knows where—and all without attracting any attention.

There was worse to come. There was evidence that made people shrug off the child's story. The place he had pointed out was situated just across from 61. Inspector Thiberge had called there the day before, and Maigret, who left nothing to chance, was now ringing there in his turn.

It was a newish house of red brick, with three steps up to the varnished pitch-pine door on which a polished brass letterbox shone. It was only a quarter past seven, but from what he had heard, the Inspector knew he could safely present himself at that hour.

A withered old woman, with a hairy upper lip, first opened a spyhole in the door and parleyed with him before letting him into a hall fragrant with the aroma of freshly made coffee. "I'll find out if the Judge will see you."

The house was occupied by a retired member of the judiciary, who was said to have a private income; he lived there alone with his servant.

There was a sound of whispering in the front room, which would normally have been the drawing room. Then the old woman came out and said spitefully,

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"Come in, but wipe your feet, please. This isn't a stable."

It wasn't a drawing room—it wasn't like anything one normally imagines. The room, which was fairly large, was something of a bedroom, study, library, and even attic, for it was heaped with the most unexpected objects.

"You're coming to look for the corpse?" a voice sneered, and made the Inspector start.

As there was a bed in the room he had quite naturally looked in that direction, but it was empty. The voice came from the corner of the fireplace where a thin old man was sunk in the depths of an armchair, a rug around his legs.

"Take your coat off. I love heat, and you won't be able to stand it for long in here."

That was so. The old man, who had a pair of tongs within reach, was doing his best to produce the biggest blaze possible from a log fire.

"I thought that, since my day, the police had made some progress and had learned to distrust the evidence of children. Children and young girls, they're the most dangerous witnesses, and when I was a Judge—"

He was wearing a thick dressing gown, and, despite the temperature in the room, around his neck there was a scarf as wide as a shawl.

"So it was right opposite my house that the crime is supposed to have been committed, eh? And you, if I'm not mistaken, are the famous Chief Inspector Maigret, whom they've been good enough to send to our town to reorganize the flying squad?" His voice grated. He was a nasty old man, aggressive and full of savage irony.

"Well, my dear Inspector, unless you accuse me of being in league with the murderer I regret to inform you, as I already told your colleague yesterday, you're on the wrong track.

"As you've no doubt been told, old men need very little sleep. And there are some people who manage with very little all their lives. That was the case with Erasmus, for instance, and also with a gentleman known by the name of Voltaire." His glance moved complacently to the library shelves stacked up to the ceiling with books.

"I could quote you many other cases you would know equally little about. But, to be brief, it is so in my own case. I pride myself on not having slept more than three hours a night in the last fifteen years. As, for the last ten, my legs have refused to support me and, in any case, I have no curiosity about the places where they could take me, I spend my days and my nights in this room which, as you can see, looks straight out onto the street.

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"From four in the morning I sit in this chair, wide-awake, believe me. I could show you the book in which I was immersed this morning, but as it's a Greek philosopher I suppose that wouldn't interest you. However, if any event of the kind described by your over-imaginative boy had taken place beneath my window, I can assure you I would have noticed it. My legs may have failed, as I told you, but my hearing is as good as ever.

"Besides, I am still curious enough by nature to take an interest in all that happens in the street, and if it amuses you I can tell at what time every housewife in the neighborhood passes my window on her way to the shops."

He looked at Maigret with a triumphant smile.

"So you're accustomed to hear young Justin going past?" the Inspector asked with saintly sweetness.

"Naturally."

"Hear and see him?"

"I don't understand."

"For more than half the year—for almost two-thirds, it's light at six in the morning. And the child served at Mass in summer as well as winter."

"I used to see him pass."

"Seeing that it was such a regular daily occurrence, like the first streetcar, you must have been expecting it."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, when a factory whistle in the neighborhood goes off every day at the same time, or when a person passes by your window as regular as clockwork, you naturally say to yourself, 'There, it's such-and-such a time.' If one day the whistle doesn't sound, you say to yourself, 'It must be Sunday.' If the person doesn't go past, you wonder, 'What can have happened to him? Is he ill?' "

The Judge's eyes were watching Maigret narrowly. He gave the impression of resenting Maigret's lecture.

"I know all that," he muttered, cracking his fingerjoints. "I was a Judge before you joined the force."

"When the altar boy went past—"

"I heard him, if that's what you want to make me admit!"

"And if he didn't go past?"

"I could happen to notice it. But I could also happen not to notice it. As in the case of the whistle you were speaking of just now: one is not struck by the absence of the whistle every Sunday."

"And yesterday?" Maigret might have been mistaken but he had the impression that the old Judge scowled; there was in his look something sulky, something fiercely shut in. But then old people often sulk just like children,

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and sometimes show the same childish stubbornness.

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, yesterday." There was no reason for the Judge to repeat the question except to give himself more time.

"I didn't notice anything."

"You didn't notice if he passed?"

"No."

"Or if he didn't pass?"

"No." Still the same frank and seemingly triumphant "No."

"No tramping of feet, no thud of a falling body, no gasping?"

"Nothing at all."

"Thank you."

"Pray don't mention it."

"Seeing that you were a magistrate, I obviously need not ask if you are ready to repeat your evidence under oath?"

"Whenever you want me to." And the old man said that with a sort of gleeful impatience.

"I must apologize for having disturbed you, sir."

The old servant must have been standing outside the door, for she was right on the threshold to show the Inspector out and close the door behind him.

Maigret had a strange feeling as he stepped out again into the everyday life of that calm suburban street, where the housewives were beginning to make their way to the shops and children could be seen going to school. It seemed to him that he had just been hoaxed, and yet the Judge had not been lying—except for one omission. He had the impression, too, that at one point he had been on the verge of discovering something very odd, very subtle, and very unexpected; at that moment it would have taken only a little effort to bring it off, but he had been incapable of doing it.

In his mind's eye he saw the boy again; he saw the old man again. He tried to see some connection between the two.

He stood on the edge of the pavement, slowly filling his pipe. Then as he had not yet had breakfast, not even a cup of coffee on getting up, and his drenched overcoat was clinging to his shoulders, he went to the corner of the place du Congrès and waited for a streetcar to take him back.

The mass of sheets and blankets heaved like a sea swell, an arm emerged, a red face appeared, shining with sweat; then a surly voice grumbled out, "Pass me the thermometer."

Madame Maigret was sewing by the window where she had drawn back the lace curtain to be able to see despite the twilight; she rose with a sigh and switched on the light. "I thought you were asleep. It's not half an hour since you took your temperature."

Resigned, knowing from ex-

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perience that it was useless to thwart her great bear of a husband, she shook the thermometer, then slid it between his lips. He found time to ask, "Nobody's come?"

"You should know, as you haven't been asleep."

He must have dropped off, however, even if it was only for a few minutes. It was that wretched carillon that kept dragging him out of his torpor and bringing him to the surface again.

It wasn't their own home. As his assignment in this provincial town was to last about six months, and as Madame Maigret could not bear the thought of her husband eating in restaurants for such a long period, she had gone with him, and they had rented a furnished apartment in the center of the town.

It was too bright for their liking with its floral wallpapers and bargain-basement furniture, and the bed that groaned under the Inspector's weight. But at least they had chosen a quiet street where, as the landlady, Madame Danse, said, not even a cat went by.

What the landlady hadn't said was that, the ground floor being occupied by a dairy, a stale smell of cheese hung about the whole house. Nor had she mentioned—and Maigret had just found out, for it was the first time he had spent the day in bed there—that the door of the dairy below was fitted not with a bell of the usual kind but with a strange apparatus of metal tubes that slowly jangled out a carillon each time a customer entered.

"How much?"

"101½."

"A little while ago it was 101."

"It'll be 102 later."

He was furious. He was always bad-tempered when he was ill, and he glowered at Madame Maigret with deep resentment for she insisted on not going out just when he would have loved to have a smoke.

It was still raining, still the same fine rain that streaked the windows, falling silently, drearily down, and giving one the feeling of being in an aquarium. The electric-light bulb, hanging unshaded at the end of its cord, gave out a harsh light. You could picture street upon street, equally empty, where the windows lit up one after the other, and people went to and fro in their cages like fish in a bowl.

"You're going to have another cup of herb tea."

That would be about the tenth since midday, and he would have to sweat out all that tepid water into his sheets, turning them in the long run into a damp compress.

He must have caught this chill or cold while he was waiting for the boy in the cold morning rain

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on the school doorstep, or perhaps later while he was roaming round the street. He had hardly got back at ten o'clock to his office at the flying squad headquarters and embarked on his normal ritual of poking the stove when he started to shiver. Then he felt too hot. His eyelids began to sting, and when he looked into the scrap of mirror in the cloakroom he saw his eyes were swollen and moist.

Besides, his pipe didn't taste the same, always a sure sign.

"Look here, Besson, if by chance I don't come in this afternoon you'll go on with the inquiries on this affair of the altar boy."

And Besson, who always thought he knew better than anyone else, said, "You really think, Chief, that there *is* anything there that a good hiding wouldn't put a stop to?"

"All the same you'll have the rue Sainte-Catherine watched by one of your colleagues—by Vallin, for instance."

"In case the corpse comes back to lie down in front of the Judge's house?"

The start of his chill left Maigret too much under the weather to rise to that. He continued heavily giving instructions. "Give me a list of all the people living in the street. As it isn't a very long one, that won't be too much work."

"Shall I question the boy again?"

"No."

From then on he had been feverish; he could feel the drops of sweat break out on his skin one after the other; he had a stale taste in his mouth, and he kept longing to sink into sleep; but when he did it was only to hear immediately the ridiculous carillon of the brass tubes in the dairy.

He hated being ill because it humiliated him and also because Madame Maigret kept a fierce watch on him to prevent him smoking his pipe. If only there had been something she should go and buy at the pharmacist's! But she had taken care to bring the contents of a full medicine cabinet with her from home.

He hated being ill, and yet there were moments when it was almost voluptuous, moments when, on closing his eyes, his years dropped away and he relived his childhood. Then there would come before him the face of young Justin, pale and strong for his years. All that morning's images returned to his memory, no longer with the precision of everyday reality, no longer in the dry light of things that one sees, but with the peculiar intensity of things that one feels.

For instance, he could have described in almost every detail that attic room he had not been

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in—the iron bed, the alarm clock on the bedside table, the child stretching out his hand, dressing noiselessly, with every gesture the same as always . . .

The same as always—that was it. That seemed to him important as evidence, as truth. When for two years at a fixed time one serves at Mass, one's actions become absolutely automatic.

The first chimes at a quarter to six . . . the alarm . . . the higher-pitched chapel bells . . . the shoes at the bottom of the stairs . . . the door opening on the cold breath of the morning town.

"You know, Madame Maigret, he's never read a detective story." Ever since they had once done so as a joke they had called each other Maigret and Madame Maigret, and now they had almost forgotten that they had first names like everyone else.

"He doesn't read the papers either."

"You should try to get to sleep."

With a last look at his pipe, lying on the black marble of the mantelpiece, he closed his eyes.

"I questioned his mother for a long time. She's a good woman, but far too easily upset by the police."

"Go to sleep."

He was silent for a little while. His breathing became louder, as if he was about to drop off. "She said he'd never seen a corpse. That's something one avoids showing children."

"What's that to do with it?"

"He told me the corpse was so big it seemed to span the pavement. That's exactly the impression you do get from a dead body on the ground. A dead body always looks bigger than a living man. You understand?"

"I don't see why you are worrying about it. Besson's taking care of all that."

"Besson doesn't believe in it."

"In what?"

"In the dead man."

"Would you like me to turn off the light?"

Despite his protests she got up on a chair and put some oiled paper round the bulb in order to lessen the glare.

"Try to sleep for an hour, and then I'll give you a fresh cup of herb tea. You're not sweating enough."

"D'you think if I just took a puff or two at my pipe—?"

"Are you mad?"

She went into the kitchen to look at the vegetable broth; he could hear her padding about. All the time in front of his eyes he saw the same stretch of the rue Sainte-Catherine, with streetlamps every fifty yards.

"The Judge claims he didn't hear anything."

"What are you saying?"

"I bet you they loathe each other."

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"Who are you talking about?" Her voice came from the other end of the kitchen. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"The Judge and the altar boy.... They've never spoken to each other, but I bet you anything they loathe each other. You know, very old people, especially those who live alone, come to be just like children. Justin went by every morning, and every morning the old Judge was there by the window. He looks like a screech owl."

"I don't know what you mean." She tood there framed in the doorway, a steaming ladle in her hand.

"Try to follow. The Judge claims he didn't hear anything, and it's too serious for me to suspect him of lying."

"I should hope so!"

"Only he doesn't dare to say that he did or didn't hear Justin go by yesterday morning."

"Perhaps he fell asleep again."

"No... He doesn't dare to lie, so he is deliberately vague about it. But the husband in Number 42, who was sitting up with his sick wife, heard running in the street."

He kept coming back to that. Sharpened by the fever, his thoughts went round in circles.

"But what could have happened to the corpse?" Madame Maigret's objection showed all the sound sense of a middle-aged woman.

"Anyway, don't think about it any more. Besson knows his job—you've often said so yourself."

Discouraged, he sank under the blankets, and tried hard to fall asleep, but it wasn't long before he was thinking again of the altar boy, his legs white against the black socks.

"There's something wrong—" he worried.

"What're you saying? Something wrong? You feel worse? You want me to call the doctor?"

Madame Maigret put down her ladle.

No. He was starting from zero all over again, obstinately. He was setting out again from the entry of the boys' school, crossing the place du Congrès. "There! It's here something goes wrong—"

First because the Judge hadn't heard anything. Unless one were to accuse him of giving false testimony, it was difficult to accept that there could have been a fight under his window, a few feet away, that a man could have started running in the direction of the barracks while the altar boy rushed off in the other direction without the Judge hearing any of it at all.

"I say, Madame Maigret—"

"What is it now?"

"Suppose they both ran off in the same direction?"

Madame Maigret sighed, picked up her sewing, and settled down

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dutifully to listen to this monologue interspersed with the hoarse breathing of her husband.

"For one thing, it's more logical—"

"What's more logical?"

"That they should both run off in the same direction. But, in this case, it was not in the direction of the barracks."

"You mean the boy chased the murderer?"

"No. It's the murderer who would have chased the boy."

"What for, as he didn't kill him?"

"To make him keep quiet, for instance."

"But he didn't manage, as the child has told his story."

"Or to prevent him saying something, giving away some detail. Listen, Madame Maigret—"

"What do you want?"

"I know you'll start by refusing, but it's absolutely essential. Pass me my pipe and my tobacco. Just a few puffs. I have the impression that I'm on the point of understanding—that in a few minutes, if I don't lose the thread—"

She went over for the pipe on the mantelpiece; with a sigh of resignation she held it out to him. "I knew you'd find a good excuse. Anyway, this evening, whether you like it or not, I'm going to make you a mustard plaster."

As luck would have it, there was no telephone in the apartment. You had to go down to the dairy where the instrument was behind the counter.

"You are going to go downstairs, Madame Maigret, and you will call Besson. It's seven o'clock; maybe he's still at the office. If not, call the Café du Centre; he'll be playing billiards there with Thiberge."

"I'm to ask him to come round?"

"To bring me over as quickly as possible not the list of everybody who lives in the street, but a list of the tenants of the houses on the left-hand side, and only between the place du Congrès and the Judge's house."

"Try at least not to get uncovered."

She had hardly started going downstairs when he got himself out of bed, hurried barefoot to his tobacco pouch to fill the pipe, then lay down again, all innocence, in the bed.

Through the thin floorboards he could hear a voice murmuring, the voice of Madame Maigret at the telephone. He smoked with relish, in little greedy puffs, although his throat was very sore. In front of him raindrops slid slowly down the black windowpanes, and that reminded him afresh of his young days and the childhood illnesses when his mother brought him caramel custard in bed.

Madame Maigret came up

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again, puffing a little, glanced round the room to see if anything was wrong, but didn't think of the pipe.

"He'll be here in about an hour."

"I must ask you to do something else, Madame Maigret. You must get dressed—" She gave him a suspicious look. "You will go to young Justin's house and you will ask his parents' permission to bring him to me. Be nice to him. If I sent one of the Inspectors, he would be sure to frighten him, and the boy's already too inclined to stiffen up. You will simply tell him that I would like to chat with him for a few minutes."

"And if his mother wants to come with him?"

"Get out of it as best you can. I don't want the mother."

He was all alone, hot, sweaty, deep down in the bed, with his pipe sticking out from the bedclothes and emitting a light cloud of smoke. When he closed his eyes he kept seeing the corner of the rue Sainte-Catherine; he was no longer Maigret the Chief Inspector—he was the altar boy, hurrying along, going the same way every morning at the same time, speaking to himself under his breath to keep up his courage.

He turned the corner of the rue Sainte-Catherine...

"Mother, I would like you to buy me a bike—" The boy was practising the speech he would make to his mother when he got home from the hospital. But it must have been more complex than that. The child would surely think up some more subtle approaches.

"You know, Mother, if I had a bike, I could—"

Or perhaps: "I've already saved up one hundred francs. If you would lend me the rest—I promise to pay it back out of the money I get for the Masses—I could—"

The corner of the rue Sainte-Catherine... A few moments before the parish church bells sound the second stroke... and there were only another hundred and fifty meters of black, empty street to go in order to touch the reassuring door of the hospital... A few strides between the pools of light from the streetlamps.

And later the boy would say, "I looked up, and I saw—"

The whole problem was there. The Judge lived almost exactly halfway up the street, equidistant from the place du Congrès and the barracks corner, and he had neither seen nor heard anything.

The sick woman's husband, the man at Number 42, lived nearer the place du Congrès, on the right side of the street, and he had heard the hurrying footsteps of a man running.

Yet, five minutes later, there

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was neither corpse nor wounded man on the pavement. And neither car nor truck had passed. The constable on duty at the bridge, the other policemen in the district who were on their beats at different places, none of them had seen anything unusual—like, for example, a man carrying another on his back.

His temperature must have been rising, but Maigret no longer thought of consulting the thermometer. It was just like his childhood: when he was ill it seemed to him that his mother, leaning over him, seemed so big that she filled the house.

There was this body lying across the pavement—so big because it was dead, with a brown-handled knife in its chest.

And behind it a man standing a few yards away, a man with very bright eyes, who had started to run—

To run in the direction of the barracks, while Justin took to his heels and fled in the opposite direction.

"There!"

There what? Maigret had said the word aloud as if it contained the solution to the problem—as if it *were* the solution to the problem. He was smiling with satisfaction as he drew on his pipe in voluptuous little puffs.

Drunks are like that. Truths suddenly become evident to them which they are incapable of explaining and which fade away as soon as they sober up.

It was there that was something false! And, in his fever, it was exactly at the point that Maigret located the jarring detail.

"Justin didn't make it up—"

His fear, his panic, when he had arrived at the hospital weren't put on. Nor had he made up the body that looked too long lying on the pavement. And there was at least one person in the street who had heard running.

What was it, then, that the sneering Judge had said? "Are you still pinning your faith on the evidence of children?"

At all events, something of the sort. Yet it was the Judge who was wrong. Children are incapable of creating a story out of nothing, because truths are not built out of nothing—there must be some basis. Children distort the facts, perhaps, but they do not invent them.

There! Again that satisfied "there" that Maigret repeated at each stage, as if congratulating himself—

There had been a corpse on the pavement—

And, doubtless, there had been a man nearby. He might even have had bright eyes.

And someone had run away.

And the old Judge, Maigret would have sworn, was not the man to lie in so many words.

Maigret was hot. He was

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drenched; nevertheless, he emerged from the sheets to go and fill a last pipe before Madame Maigret returned. While he was up he took the opportunity of opening the cupboard and taking a large gulp from a bottle of rum. Too bad if his temperature did rise a little that night, but everything would be tied up.

And it would be a very pretty piece of work—an anything but orthodox inquiry conducted while tucked up in his bed. That was something Madame Maigret would be quite incapable of appreciating.

The Judge hadn't lied, and yet he must have done his utmost to dig at the boy he hated, as two children of the same age can hate one another.

The customers were getting fewer downstairs, for the perposterous door chimes were ringing less often. No doubt the dairyman, his wife, and their daughter, pink as a ham, were at dinner in the rear of the shop.

Footsteps on the pavement. Coming up the stairs. Stumbling footsteps, like a child's. Madame Maigret opened the door and pushed young Justin in in front of her, his thick navy-blue woolen jacket sparkling with little pearls of rain. He smelled like a wet dog.

"Wait a minute, sonny, I'll take off your jacket."

"I can do it myself."

Another suspicious look from Madame Maigret. Obviously she could not believe that this was still the same pipeful. She may even have suspected the rum.

"Sit down, Justin," said the Inspector, pointing to a chair.

"Thanks. I'm not tired."

"I've had you brought here to have a friendly little chat. What were you busy at?"

"My arithmetic homework."

"So in spite of what you've been through, you've been to school?"

"Why shouldn't I have gone?"

He was a proud little fellow.

He had drawn himself up again to his full height. Perhaps the Inspector too, lying there in bed, seemed to him to be bigger and longer?

"Madame Maigret, be so kind as to go and take a look at the broth in the kitchen and close the door."

This done, he winked at the boy.

"Pass me my tobacco pouch. It's on the mantelpiece. And the pipe that should be in my overcoat pocket. Yes, the one hanging behind the door. Thank you, son. Were you frightened when my wife came to fetch you?"

"No." He said it with pride.

"Have things been difficult for you?"

"Only because everyone keeps saying I'm making it up."

"And you aren't making it up, are you?"

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"There was a dead man on the pavement and another who—"

"Hush!"

"What?"

"Not so fast. Sit down."

"I'm not tired."

"You've already said so, but it makes *me* tired to watch you."

He sat down on the chair, right on the edge, and his feet didn't touch the ground. His legs swung and his knees stuck out bare between his short trousers and his socks.

"What prank have you played on the Judge?"

A rapid instinctive reaction. "I've never done anything to him."

"You know which Judge I'm talking about?"

"The one who's always at his window. He looks like an owl."

"I should have said a screech owl. What's been going on between you?"

"I've never spoken to him."

"What's been going on between you?"

"In winter I never saw him, because his curtains were drawn when I passed."

"But in summer?"

"I stuck out my tongue at him."

"Why?"

"Because he looked at me as if he was laughing at me; he would start snickering to himself while he watched me."

"You've often stuck out your tongue at him?"

"Every time I saw him."

"And he?"

"He'd give a nasty laugh. I thought it was because I served at Mass and because he was an unbeliever."

"So it was he who was lying."

"What did he say?"

"That nothing happened outside his house yesterday morning as he would have noticed."

The lad stared intently at Maigret, then lowered his head.

"He was lying, wasn't he?"

"There was a corpse with a knife in its chest on the pavement."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I know because it's true," said Maigret softly. "Pass me the matches. I've let my pipe go out."

"Are you too hot?"

"It's nothing. A chill."

"You caught it this morning?"

"That's possible. Sit down."

He came suddenly alert and called, "Madame Maigret! Would you go downstairs. I think that's Besson who's just arrived and I don't want him to come up till I've finished. You keep him company downstairs. My friend Justin will call you."

He said once more to his young companion, "Sit down. It's true, too, that you both ran away."

"I told you it was true."

"And I'm sure of it. Go and see that there's nobody at the door and it's closed tightly."

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The boy went, not understanding, but imbued with the importance of his acts and movements.

"You know, Justin, you're a good little fellow."

"Why d'you say that?"

"The corpse is true, the man who ran is true."

The boy raised his head once again and Maigret saw that his lip was trembling.

"And the Judge, who didn't lie, because a Judge wouldn't dare to lie, didn't tell the whole truth."

The room was redolent of Maigret's cold, rum, and tobacco. The smell of the vegetable broth wafted in under the door from the kitchen, and it was still raining silver drops on the black windowpanes. Outside, the street was deserted. Was it still a man and a child who found themselves face to face? Or two men? Or two children?

Maigret's head felt heavy, his eyes were watering. His pipe had a strange sickly taste that he did not find unpleasant, and he remembered the odors of the hospital, the chapel, and the sacristy.

"The Judge didn't tell the whole truth because he wanted to torment you. And you, you didn't tell the whole truth, either. Now I won't have you crying—it's not worth letting the whole world know what's going on between the two of us at this moment. You understand, Justin?"

The boy nodded. "If what you told us hadn't happened at all, the husband at Number 42 would not have heard running."

"I didn't make it up."

"Exactly. But if it happened as you said, the Judge could not have said that he didn't hear anything. And if the murderer had run in the direction of the barracks, the old man could not have sworn that nobody ran past his house."

The child didn't move; he was staring fixedly at his toes.

"Basically, the Judge was honest when he dared not say that you had gone past his house yesterday morning. But he could perhaps have said that you didn't pass. That is the truth—because you ran away in the opposite direction. No doubt he was also being truthful when he claimed that no man had run past on the pavement outside his window. For the man didn't go off in *that* direction."

"What do you know about it?" He had stiffened and was staring wide-eyed at Maigret, just as he must have stared the day before at the murderer or the victim.

"Because, inevitably, the man rushed off in the same direction as you, which explains how the husband at 42 heard him pass. Knowing that you had seen him, that you had seen the corpse, that you could get him caught, he ran *after* you."

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"If you tell my mother—"

"Shush. I've no wish to say anything at all to your mother or anyone else. You see, Justin, my boy, I'm going to talk to you like a man. A murderer with enough intelligence and coolness to make a corpse disappear in a few minutes without leaving the slightest trace would not have been so stupid as to let you run away after what you had seen."

"I don't know."

"But I do. It's my business to know. The most difficult thing is not killing a man: it's getting rid of him afterwards—and this fellow contrived a magnificent disappearance. He disappeared even though you saw him and you saw the murderer. In other words, the latter was a very strong man. And a very strong man risking his neck would not have let you get away like that."

"I didn't know—"

"What didn't you know?"

"I didn't know it was so serious."

"It isn't at all serious, as the whole thing has now been put right."

"You've arrested him?" There was tremendous hope in the way he spoke.

"He will no doubt be arrested very shortly. Sit still."

"I won't move."

"First of all, if the scene had taken place in front of the Judge's—that's to say, halfway up the street—you'd have noticed it from farther away, and you'd have had time to run away. That's the only mistake the murderer made, cunning as he was."

"How did you guess?"

"I didn't guess—I too was an altar boy, and I served at the six o'clock Mass. You wouldn't have gone almost a hundred yards down the street without looking in front of you. Therefore the corpse was nearer, much nearer, almost at the corner of the street."

"Five houses farther on."

"You were thinking of something else—your bicycle—and you probably walked twenty yards without seeing anything."

"You can't possibly know."

"And when you saw it you ran towards the place du Congrès to reach the hospital by the other way. The man ran behind you."

"I thought I was going to die of fright."

"He put his hand on your shoulder?"

"He grabbed my shoulders with both his hands. I thought he was going to throttle me."

"He told you to say—"

The child was crying, but not sobbing. He was ashen pale, and the tears were rolling slowly down his cheeks. "If you tell my mother she'll be at me about it all my life. She's always at me."

"He told you to say that it had all happened farther along?"

"Yes."

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"In front of the Judge's?"

"It was I who thought of the Judge's house—because of sticking out my tongue at him. He only said towards the other end of the street. And to say that he ran away in the direction of the barracks."

"And it just missed being the perfect crime, for nobody believed you, seeing that there was no murderer or corpse or trace of any kind, and the whole thing seemed impossible."

"But you?"

"Me? I don't count. It's pure chance that I have been an altar boy and then that I've had a fever today. What did he promise you?"

"He told me that if I didn't say what he wanted he would surely find me wherever I went, in spite of the police, and he'd cut my throat like a chicken."

"And then?"

"He asked me what I'd like to have."

"And you replied, 'A bike.'"

"How did you know that?"

"I keep telling you, I was an altar boy myself."

"And you wanted a bike?"

"That and a lot of things that I'd never had. Why did you say he had bright eyes?"

"I don't know. I didn't see his eyes. He wore thick glasses. But I didn't want them to find him."

"Because of the bike."

"Perhaps. You're going to tell my mother, aren't you?"

"Neither your mother nor anyone else. We're pals, aren't we, you and I? Now, pass me my tobacco again and don't tell Madame Maigret I've smoked three pipefuls while we've been here. You see, grownups don't always tell the whole truth, either. What door was it in front of, Justin?"

"The yellow house next to the pork butcher's."

"Go and find my wife."

"Where is she?"

"Downstairs with Inspector Besson, who was so unkind to you."

"And is he going to arrest me?"

"Open the closet. There's a pair of trousers hanging there."

"What am I to do?"

"In the left-hand pocket you'll find a wallet."

"I've got it."

"In the wallet there are some visiting cards."

"You want them?"

"Give me one. And the pen on the table as well."

And Maigret took it and wrote on the card beside his name: *Credit for one bicycle.*

"Come in, Besson."

Madame Maigret threw a glance at the opaque cloud of smoke that encircled the light veiled with oiled paper, and rushed toward the kitchen from which there came a smell of burning.

As for Besson, taking the chair the boy had just got out of, he

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said, "I have the list you wanted me to draw up. I had better tell you straight away—"

"That it's no use. Who lives at Number 40?"

"One moment." He consulted his notes. "Wait . . . 40. The house has only one tenant."

"I thought as much."

"Oh?" A brief uneasy glance toward the child. "A foreigner, a dealer in precious stones. Name of Fross."

And from the depths of the pillows on which he now reclined, Maigret's voice rose in a nonchalant murmur. "A receiver."

"What did you say, Chief?"

"A receiver. And also, perhaps, head of a gang."

"I don't understand."

"Doesn't matter. Be so kind, Besson, as to pass me the bottle of rum that's in the wall cupboard. Quickly before Madame Maigret arrives. I bet my temperature's up to 102—the sheets will have to be changed twice tonight. Fross . . . Get a search warrant from the Examining Magistrate—no, at this hour of night that'll take time, for he's sure to be out playing bridge somewhere. Have you had dinner? I'm waiting for my broth. There are some blank warrants in my desk. Fill one out Search the place. You're bound to find the corpse even if it means knocking down a cellar wall."

Poor Besson was looking anxiously at his Chief and then at the child, who was waiting good as gold in the corner.

"Do it quickly, old chap. If he knows the lad came here this evening you'll find the bird has flown. He's a smart one, you'll see."

And indeed he was. While the flying squad were ringing his bell he was trying to make his getaway over the courtyard walls. It took all night to lay hands on him—he was finally caught on the rooftops—while other detectives were searching the house for hours before they found the corpse buried in the cellar.

Obviously a case of settling an old score. Some fellow, dissatisfied with the boss and feeling cheated, had gone and badgered him at his house in the early hours of the morning; Fross had felled him on the doorstep, never thinking an altar boy would be coming round the corner at that moment.

"How much?" Maigret had no longer the courage to look at the thermometer himself.

"102."

"You're not cheating?" He knew that she was cheating and that he had a higher temperature, but he didn't care. It was blissfully good to sink into unconsciousness like this, to let himself slip quickly, dizzily away into a world that was hazy but terribly real—a world where an altar boy who

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looked like the young Maigret of other days was running desperately down the street, thinking he was going to be strangled or that he was going to get a nickel-plated bicycle.

"What are you saying?" asked Madame Maigret, who stood waiting with a hot mustard plaster for his neck in her plump hands.

Meanwhile he was mumbling vaguely like a feverish child, speaking of the "first stroke" and the "second stroke."

"I'm going to be late—"

"Late for what?"

"For Mass. The sister . . ."

He couldn't manage the word *sacristine*. "The . . . sister—"

Finally, with a large compress round his neck, he fell asleep and dreamed of the Mass in his village church, of Marie Titin whose inn he used to run past because he was afraid.

"Afraid of what?"

"All the same, I got him—"

"Who?"

"The Judge."

It was so complicated to explain . . . The Judge looked like someone in his village, someone he had stuck out his tongue at . . . The blacksmith? No . . . it was the father-in-law of the woman at the bakery. It didn't matter. Someone he didn't like . . .

It was the Judge who had cheated in order to get his own back on the altar boy. He had said he had not heard footsteps running *past* his house. He hadn't said that he had heard the sound of a chase *in the other direction.* Old men have a second childhood. They squabble with children—just like children . . .

Maigret was content, despite everything. He had cheated over the three pipefuls—no, four. There was a fine strong taste of tobacco in his mouth, and he could sink into sleep . . .

And tomorrow, because he had a chill, Madame Maigret would make him caramel custard.

CRIMINALIMERICKS

I LOVE PARIS WHEN IT DRIZZLES

by D. R. BENSEN

In Paris' crummier streets
One needs caution about whom one meets;
For, day after day,
Inspector Maigret
Has new clients all covered with sheets.

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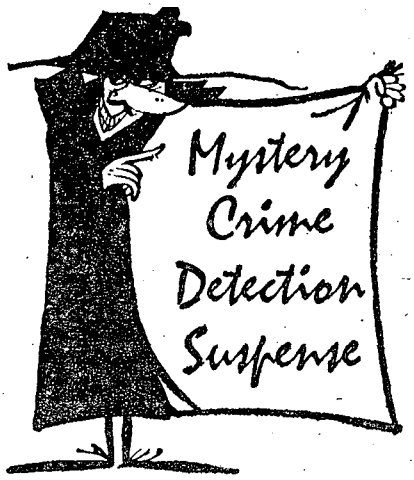

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